

City should take measured approach to sex abuse laws (Globe Gazette Editorial)

Mason City is in position to push aside the emotional rhetoric regarding sexual abusers of children and forge a law that could have a positive effect on making our children more safe.

It's an effort on which the state and many other communities — including some in North Iowa — have fallen short.

Almost everyone agrees we should do what we can to protect children from those adults and even older children who would abuse them sexually. The problem is that emotion often trumps logic in the case where our children's safety is concerned. The emotions get revved up even higher when the issue of sex comes into the equation.

The sexual abuse and murder last year of little Jetseta Gage of Cedar Rapids by a registered sex offender, and a ruling by the Iowa Supreme Court that it's constitutional to set residency limits on sexual offenders, sent many cities into overdrive to set up their own limits, adding parks, libraries, swimming pools and other places to the schools and day care centers that state law already prohibits sex offenders from living within 2,000 feet of.

The irony is that these laws would not have helped save Jetseta Gage. Her body was found in a trailer occupied by Roger Paul Bentley, who was later convicted of first degree murder and kidnapping. However, the trailer was outside Iowa City, well outside any of the 2,000-foot limits that have been adopted.

The other irony, as we have stated here before, is that these laws intended to restrict sexual offenders may actually make that job more difficult by forcing sexual offenders to either become effectively homeless or making them ignore the requirements of the sex abuse offender registry and go underground. In either case it makes them harder to track. It also disrupts their lives and removes them further from society, creating an environment where they may become more prone to re-offend.

And the laws need law enforcement agencies to expend extra resources to enforce. County sheriffs, county attorneys and police chiefs have come out against these residency restrictions. Not to mention the obvious fact that sexual offenders who re-offend are perhaps even more likely not to re-offend near their own homes.

Mason City was also considering a residency restriction, but has decided instead to look more closely at the subject. The City Council decided last week to form a task force to explore options available to the city.

Mayor Roger Bang said he'd like to see the council concentrate more on restricting the places where registered sex offenders can linger rather than where they live, "not so much about where people live, but where people go," he said.

That's an idea we have espoused since the residency restrictions became an issue.

Council member Scott Tornquist pointed out another problem with the residency law — that it does not differentiate between the adult who sexually violates young children and the older teenager who may have consensual sex with another teen just a few years younger but below the legal threshold.

Interim City Administrator Pat McGarvey said this should be an opportunity to get input from many

different groups — a few have already addressed the council on the topic.

Forming a task force is sometimes the way a government body pushes a difficult subject aside. We don't think that's the intent here. Fortunately, the city has time to explore the topic rationally and make informed, reasonable rules.

As horrible as sexual abuse is, the reality is that the vast majority of it is done by family members or by people known to the victim. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services says that only 4 percent of the reported cases of sexual abuse are done by strangers. And most of it is done by people who have not been previously convicted of abuse and are not on any registry.

There's not much the city can do to effectively combat those types of abuses. The way to get at that abuse is through programs that support the family and teach good parenting skills, by minimizing opportunities for individual adults to be alone and unmonitored with individual children, by teaching children to say no if someone asks them to do anything that makes them feel uncomfortable, and by improving communication with our children at all levels.

Still, there are steps the city can take to combat sexual abuse. A task force to explore all the options and seek input from a wide variety of sources is a good place to start.