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LAWS KEEPING SOME SEX OFFENDERS HOMELESS

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BY DIANA MOSKOVITZ dmoskovitz@MiamiHerald.com It began when lawmakers crafted **laws** with the best intentions -- **keeping** convicted **sex offenders** away from children.

Then the **laws** had an unexpected consequence: Today, anywhere from 30 to 40 convicted **sex offenders** in the state -- who mostly live in South Florida -- can't find homes, according to the Florida Department of Corrections.

The problem is expected to get worse as more convicts are released -- and they find it nearly impossible to find housing. It is this dilemma that is highlighted in a bill now making its way through the Florida Legislature.

Consider:

* In Broward County, three men were kicked out of four locations in two months as they struggled to find housing earlier this year. Of the three, two are back in jail after violating a condition of their release.

The third, Sten Johanson, 45, is living on the western edge of urbanized Broward, according to correction records. He gave an address of 1006 N. U.S. 27, which is Sawgrass Recreation Park.

* In Miami-Dade, groups of **sex offenders** live in makeshift communities, such as one found under a Julia Tuttle Causeway bridge in Miami.

"These people are sort of victims of the system," Davie civil rights lawyer Randy Fleischer said. "Under the **law**, they're not protected from discrimination in housing. And yet they need to live somewhere, but where do you put them? People will say, 'I don't want them in my backyard.'"

Several years ago, Florida lawmakers crafted rules stating that convicted **sex offenders** who were released from prison couldn't live within 1,000 feet of places where children congregate, such as schools and parks.

Municipalities followed with their own beefed-up restrictions. In **some** places, such as Davie, Pembroke Pines and Weston, convicted **sex offenders** can't live within 2,500 feet of where children congregate.

Then came skyrocketing housing prices. For people who typically have low-paying jobs after leaving prison, this was a huge hurdle.

In theory, the **offenders** could move to places that have fewer restrictions and fewer children. But **offenders** from South Florida tend to stay here. Even convicted **sex offenders** have a sense of

home. "**Some** of them have said, 'Even though I don't have a place to live, all my resources are here.' Family, jobs, things like that," said Gretl Plessinger, spokeswoman for the Florida Department of Corrections.

Homelessness makes it harder for the **offenders** to reintegrate into society, Plessinger said. People without a true address are tougher for probation officials to track. And spending so much time looking for a home, or trying to survive in a makeshift one, makes attending required programs difficult. Meanwhile, agencies charged with tracking convicted predators are forced to make sense of the different boundaries that are mandated in various communities.

"These are well-intentioned ordinances that have backfired and are now jeopardizing public safety," said state Sen. Dave Aronberg, D-Greenacres.

It's these scenarios that Aronberg said led him to file a Senate bill this year -- as he did last year -- relating to sexual predators. A matching version is moving through the House. Aronberg said that recent media attention to the problem had provided more momentum for his efforts this year.

Part of the bill aims to revise provisions relating to the residence of sexual predators. It would mandate a minimum distance of 1,500 feet between where **offenders** can live and where children congregate -- and ensure that no local ordinances could change that 1,500-foot distance.

Still, others believe the 2,500-foot restriction should be extended statewide. One is state Rep. Martin Kiar, a Democrat whose hometown of Davie has the 2,500-foot limit. Kiar said he believes that despite the increasing rate of homelessness among convicted **sex offenders** and predators, the restrictions work. "I know a lot of people disagree with me on this, but I believe the more restrictions we place on sexual predators, the safer our children," Kiar said.

No matter what restriction is put in place, says civil rights lawyer Fleischer, the system will still be flawed because of the way convicted **sex offenders** are handled after their release.

"The system isn't treating these people to make them well. It is treating them as pariahs," Fleischer said. "You've got drug courts, and teen courts and family **law** and juvenile courts. But you don't have a place for sexual deviants or **sex offenders**. How are you going to deal with them?"

"They aren't getting treatment. They can't even live anywhere."

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