

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Megan's Law for Massachusetts

Megan was a six-year-old child in New Jersey who was murdered by a convicted sex offender. The murder made national headlines when it was discovered that her killer was a neighbor, a man who had been allowed to hide that part of his background from people in his town. Megan's Law is New Jersey's response to that terrible crime. It requires convicted sexual offenders to register their whereabouts with local police. I support a similar initiative that is working its way through the legislature in our state of Massachusetts. These are the reasons for my support.

Sex offenders have a 40 percent recidivism rate, making it one of the most repeated criminal acts. At first look, the requirement that a sex offender announce his criminal history goes against the grain for civil libertarians. Persons who have paid their debt to society should not be followed by a criminal history. Massachusetts has a strong tradition of protecting criminal history, but in this instance we are weighing the rights of the public against that protection.

The Massachusetts CORI statute provides broad protection for our citizens by sharply limiting access to a person's criminal record. One extreme example of the harm that can come from such protection came when a Plymouth woman was killed by a convicted sex offender whose background was intentionally hidden by corrections officials. Megan's law would have protected that woman.

The New Jersey law has faced and passed court challenges for constitutionality. We are coming to understand that sex offenders stand out in the realm of wrongdoers. They are generally not rehabilitated even when incarceration includes therapy. Thus a registry of those offenders is essential to protecting the public. An offender would be less likely to commit a criminal act again knowing the police are keeping an eye on him.

This year Massachusetts is working to join the 40 other states in passing our own version of Megan's law. Rep. Barbara Hyland, responding to a victim's family members has joined with House Republican Leader Ed Teague in sponsoring an act to protect the community from sexual offenders. The law would create a sexual offender registry containing the names of those who have been convicted of various sex crimes. It further requires that within five days of his release from jail a convicted sex offender register his address and intended place of employment with both the state and his local police department. Failure to do this could subject the offender to a \$500 fine, a year in jail and revocation of probation.

Police officials in states that have a registration program report they have had a greater success in apprehending repeat offenders. It is time for Massachusetts to join the ranks of the jurisdictions that make this tool available to law enforcement officials to protect our children from those offenders who pose a serious threat to society.