



MISSOURI SENATE

JEFFERSON CITY

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**A Weekly Column for the
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Jessica's Law

JEFFERSON CITY – State lawmakers across the country have been cracking down on predators who prey on our children by increasing penalties, ensuring felons serve out their sentences, and improving the ability to monitor felons once they are released from prison. This year the Missouri General Assembly strengthened state laws against those who prey on children by enacting a sweeping bill targeting sexual offenders. Many of the provisions of Senate Bill 588 et al target sexual offenders who commit offenses against children.

For example, the legislation denies bail to persons convicted of sexual offenses involving children and pornography offenses involving children. The bill also increases the minimum prison term for a “persistent sexual offender” from 30 years without probation or parole to life imprisonment without eligibility for probation or parole. The legislation also bars the courts from granting probation or parole to those convicted of failing to register as a sex offender as a third offense.

“Jessica’s Law” is named after nine-year-old Jessica Lunsford, a Florida girl who was taken from her bedroom by a registered sex offender who raped and killed her. Florida police lost track of the sex offender, John Couey, because he was staying with his sister yards away from Jessica’s home.

In response, Missouri lawmakers included a provision in SB 588 which prohibits sex offenders from “residing” within 1,000 feet of a school. “Residing” is defined as sleeping in a residence, which may include more than one location and may be mobile or transitory. The act

also prohibits sex offenders from being present or loitering within 500 feet of a school building or property or a school-related activity whenever anyone under the age of 18 is present.

The state Board of Probation and Parole already electronically monitors convicted sex offenders with a GPS tracking device for the rest of their lives. SB 588 expands this tracking to include those convicted of sexual trafficking of a child under the age of 12.

We have also heard numerous reports of predators using the Internet to stalk children and entice them to meet, often resulting in a sexual assault of the child. Missouri legislators enacted several provisions in SB 588 targeting these cyber-crimes. The bill calls on the Department of Public Safety to create a program to distribute grants to law enforcement task forces and agencies that focus on internet cyber crimes. These grants will allow law enforcement agencies to hire new detectives and forensic specialists who investigate Internet sex crimes against children. The bill also requires registered sex offenders to give their probation or parole officer access to his or her personal home computer as a condition of probation or parole.

Additionally, the legislation increases the amount of information about sexual offenders to be posted on the Missouri Highway Patrol's sex offender website. That website will now include a toll-free hotline allowing people to report on the residency of registered sex offenders.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children reports there are 400,000 registered sex offenders in the United States. Senate Bill 588 will help Missouri citizens keep track of registered offenders in their neighborhoods, while reducing the number of offenses committed against children in the future.

If you have questions or comments about this or any other issue, please feel free to contact me at 573-751-8793 or by e-mail at: delbertscott@senate.mo.gov

*Senator Delbert Scott represents the people of Barton, Benton, Cedar, Dallas,
Henry, Hickory, Pettis, Polk and St. Clair counties in the Missouri Senate.*