



MISSOURI SENATE

Rob Mayer
25th Senate District

JEFFERSON CITY

CAPITOL BUILDING, ROOM 331
JEFFERSON CITY, MO 65101

**A Column for the Week
of October 8, 2007**

**Contact: Irene Murray
(573) 751-3859**

Stopping Those Who Prey Upon Children

JEFFERSON CITY — Over the past few days, we've all heard the stories of the abuse two St. Louis-area boys suffered at the hands of child kidnapper and molester Michael Devlin. His 2002 abduction of Shawn Hornbeck and January, 2007 abduction of Ben Ownby was finally foiled after another teenager identified his pickup during the Ownby abduction. Both the boys were shortly thereafter reunited with their families, but during their time in captivity... four years worth in Shawn's case... the boys were subjected to sexual abuse and threats of death. Now, Devlin has received dozens of life sentences for his crimes against the boys and their families with even more sentencing to come. He won't be able to hurt any other child ever again.

Devlin's crime only highlights some of the steps the legislature has taken over the past couple of years to give our law enforcement officers the tools they need to track down and catch child pornographers and predators and lock those perverts away for a long time. We've even empowered the victims to take back what they can from their abusers.

First off, a couple of years ago, we passed and the governor signed the Cyber Crimes Grant Program. With a modest \$250,000 appropriation to various law enforcement agencies across the state, officers were able to step up their efforts to catch those who troll the Internet, trying to catch unsuspecting children... first in lewd chat and then by actual physical contact and abuse. This year, we were able to increase that program to about \$1.25 million dollars. The SEMO Cyber Crimes Task Force received a check for more than \$48,000 this past summer that will help officers get the resources, training, and the people they need to go after these Internet predators. That way, when a middle-aged criminal thinks he's meeting a teenager for sex, he'll actually be ensnared by an undercover cop and taken away to jail.

During the past session, we passed measures that give victims the right to go after their abusers in civil courts by allowing any person who, while a child or minor, was a victim of child exploitation or child pornography, to bring a civil case against those who hurt them. The victim

would have 10 years after turning 21 to file the suit, or three years after discovering the offense—whichever is later. The scars of sexual exploitation can last a lifetime. Unfortunately, with the advent of the Internet, the images can go around the world in an instant and remain there long after the crime was perpetrated. These civil measures we passed will make sure those who commit these heinous acts cannot continue to profit off them in the future.

While the state and local sheriffs and police departments are doing what they can to cut down on these types of crimes, parents and guardians need to do their parts. There's a text messaging shorthand: POS... that means Parent Over Shoulder. It's what kids say when they are chatting online, and their parents are nearby. You need to be that Parent Over Shoulder, actively engaged in what your kids are doing and who they are talking to.

Our children only get to be young once. Working together with law enforcement agencies, the Legislature, schools, and parents, let's make sure those years are happy and free of any predators just waiting to catch your child in an Internet web.

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Senator Robert Mayer represents the people of Wayne, Ripley, Butler, Stoddard, New Madrid, Pemiscot and Dunklin counties in the Missouri Senate.