

## NEWS

### Task force airs 'Sex Offender Watch'

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*Panel wants to gather comment on proposed new legislation to protect the community*

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GERMANTOWN — A cross-section of 17 law enforcement officials, social service commissioners, educators and administrators from three counties gathered at the Germantown Library for a roundtable discussion on how to enhance community protection from sex offenders.

The group was assembled as part of an ongoing study by the New York State Assembly Minority "Sex Offender Watch" task force, chaired by Assemblyman David G. McDonough, R-Merrick. Assemblymen Pete Lopez, R-Schoharie, and Marc Molinaro, R-Red Hook, were also there to hear input. Discussions, facilitated by the task force, have been held all over the state with the eventual goal of drafting new legislation.

Patrick Gabriel, superintendent of the Germantown Central School District, said schools have a precarious role when it comes to identifying sex offenders or sex crimes, especially when they involve two minors, such as when the school hears about a high school sophomore dating a seventh grader, or a younger student.

Gabriel said that in this case he feels "obligated to both kids," and doesn't want to pre-judge or underestimate the seriousness of any allegations.

"It's hard to know precisely what occurred," he said. "It's hard because the level of victimization is not clear to you."

Superintendent of the Catskill Central School District Dr. Kathleen P. Farrell agreed, saying it was difficult to judge "whether or not there's truth in the basis of some of the accusations."

Farrell also has students who are children of sex offenders. "Those kids have rights," she said, referencing a child's right to have their parent at graduation or other momentous occasion.

"We don't let them come in without prior notification," said Sally Sharkey, superintendent of the Cairo-Durham Central School District. A police officer or D.A.R.E. officer is also present in these cases.

Krista J. Barringer, director of the Ulster County Youth Department, pointed out that education for children regarding sex offenders, as well as sex, is probably out of date.

"The messages children are hearing are multiple and varied, and all of them are not necessarily a unified voice. We want to make this a similar kind of message to 'stop, drop and roll,'" she said.

"The misinformation and lack of knowledge in the community is amazing," said Therese McGee-Ward, Executive Director of the Greene County Youth Bureau. "There's no understanding of the different (sex offender) levels. They don't understand what 'inappropriate' means...and unfortunately, when you have a forum, parents don't show up."

"How do we get inside these kid's heads in a strategic, consistent way?" asked Lopez.

"Kids don't see sex in the same way adults do, or did," said Farrell. "Society has changed, and (childrens') perception of what's good and bad is different."

"Information is good, but you have to keep it simple," said Columbia County Sheriff David W. Harrison, Jr.

Harrison pointed out that a lot of sex offender education is still based on the concept of not talking to strangers, when "it's usually somebody they know, some way or another."

Harrison told the Assemblymen that the Sheriff's Department was running into problems when sex offenders moved to the area from other states; there isn't legislation, he said, that requires them to re-register their status in New York upon

moving. Additionally, part time local police departments get first notice when a registered sex offender moves to their area. "I think it should be a full time law enforcement agency that deals with the sex offenders," he said.

Paul Mossman, commissioner of the Columbia County Department of Social Services, weighed in with difficulties in his agency. He cautioned them to take a good look at the impact of cutting Victim Services in the 2010 state budget. "You need the service, and the funding," he said.

Social Services is mandated to provide housing for sex offenders if they become homeless, "if they're unable to sustain themselves, and they have no means of affordable permanent housing," Mossman said.

Columbia County places those who need housing in motels, and the county has no transitional housing plan. "There's no safeguards built-in there," Mossman said. "It's like you squeeze the balloon from one end and you have it almost exploding from the other."

Many of the panelists said that there is a "not in my backyard" effect surrounding sex offenders, so placing them is difficult. Often when a community learns an offender is in their area, the community rallies to remove them; this goes on and on, sometimes resulting in a sex offender "going underground," or not being easily locatable.

Michael Benvenuto, director of the Columbia County Department of Probation, said that over the last 25 years, state funding cuts to his probation department have been extreme, and the department is now funded 15 percent by the state.

"When laws are changed, it puts more pressure on community supervision," he said, adding that when registered sex offenders went from six to 10 years of probation, there was no extra funding made available for the six probation officers in his department. There are 400 to 500 people on probation in the county.

The next forum will be held in Yorktown Oct. 23. The task force will continue traveling through New York to collect input for the purpose of drafting new legislation that might alleviate some of the problems faced by different departments and agencies when it comes to handling sex offenders.

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