

Bill would permit checks for sex offenses

By Pat Murphy
staff writer

The Oakland County Prosecutor wants schools, cities and other agencies working with children to be able to check on the sexual misconduct — if any — of prospective employees or volunteers.

Richard Thompson wants to change existing law to enable organizations involved in the care and custody of children to have access to existing background records.

Existing law enables police to compile such records, Thompson said. But it specifically blocks release of such information to cities, schools, day care centers and other agencies.

Having such information on prospective employees and volunteers would enable parks and recreation departments, as well as agencies like the Boy Scouts of America, to screen out people who have records of sexual misconduct.

The information would remain private, Thompson said. But agencies would be able to act on it, presumably to reject job applicants or volunteers with sex offenses in their background.

Thompson held a press conference Thursday to talk about the background checks and the legislative changes needed to make them available in Michigan.

STATE SEN. David M. Honigman, R-West Bloomfield, and State Rep.

Michael J. Bouchard, R-Birmingham, said they would co-sponsor the legislation before lawmakers adjourn for the summer.

Honigman, who attended the press conference, said the bill is necessary to protect children "who are most vulnerable when entrusted by their parents to the care and control of another adult authority figure such as teacher, coach or cub scout leader."

Honigman said organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union might object to the legislation as an invasion of privacy. "But the right to privacy has to be weighed against protecting the child from harm," he said.

Bouchard, who had a telephone link to the news conference, said the legislation will give some peace of mind to parents who presently entrust their youngsters to day care centers or little league coaches.

The lawmakers said the law could be enacted yet this year, putting Michigan on a par with California, Alabama and other states that currently have such legislation.

IF MICHIGAN had such legislation earlier, the prosecutor said, officials might have been warned about James Stoller and thus able to keep him away from the youngsters he is now accused of molesting.

He was referring to James William Stoller, more commonly known as "Bill," who is charged with more than 30 counts of criminal sexual conduct and providing pornography.

Child molesters gravitate toward little leagues, scout groups, church organizations and other organizations that normally attract children, often wearing suits and appearing normal and intelligent.

— Jerry J. Tobias
psychologist and former police official

Stoller, a Southfield resident, was a coach in the Garden City youth Athletic Association when the alleged incidents occurred involving boys between the ages of 10 and 13.

Stoller had been arrested on previous sex-related charges in DeWitt (near Lansing) and in Arizona — something the prosecutor said officials would have been able to detect had the proposed law been in effect.

Records of Stoller's arrests for child molesting are a matter of public record, Thompson said. But people — like Garden City little league officials — wouldn't necessarily know where to look.

Under the law proposed by

Thompson, police could check on an individual like Stoller and share their findings with officials from any public or private agency entrusted with the care of children.

"Currently the state runs about 50,000 computerized criminal history checks per month," the prosecutor said. "So the information is available, it's just a matter of accessing it."

"At a time more families have both parents working outside the home — requiring at least eight hours of child care by strangers — we owe it to parents and their children to provide a safety net," Thompson said. "We should take all

reasonable steps to ensure that the child is not being placed with one already known by law enforcement to be a molester or felon."

ALSO ATTENDING the press conference and endorsing the proposed law change were Jerry J. Tobias, a Bloomfield Township trustee, and David Sanger, district chair of the North Trails District of the Detroit Area Council of the Boy Scouts of America.

"We recommended this (the law change) 15 years ago," said Tobias, a psychologist and the former chief of

police in the Village of Franklin. "But nothing ever came of it."

Tobias was also part of the task force appointed to investigate the Oakland County child killings in the mid 1970s. Four youngsters were abducted and killed. Authorities were never able to solve the murders, although they believe the killer is dead.

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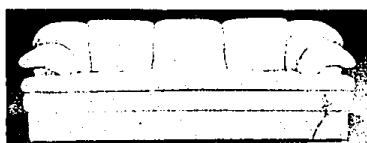
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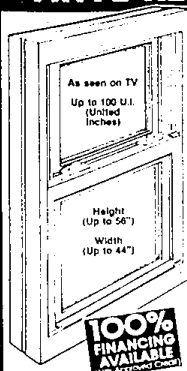
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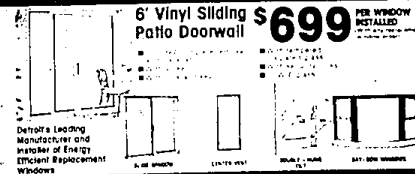
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