

Sex Offenders Found Living Near Several Pitt County Schools

By Lauren Robertson

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Local officials around North Carolina geared up for the complicated task of enforcing a law that bans sex offenders and others who have committed crimes against children from living within 1,000 feet of a school or day care center.

The bill signed on Dec. 1, 2006, targets North Carolina's 10,000 registered sex offenders, including nearly 260 offenders in the Greenville area.

Yet, within Pitt County at least three primary schools have sex offenders that reside within 1,000 feet of school premises. At least four primary schools in Greenville have sex offenders residing within a half a mile, according to offender addresses found on the North Carolina sex offender registry.

The law states that offenders cannot live within 1,000 feet of schools, but law enforcement officials are allowing the offenders who lived there before the law went into effect to stay in their homes and not restrict their housing and its proximity to these schools.

"I think the law is something that was needed," said Pitt County Sheriff Mac Manning. "I think sex offenders need to stay as far from schools as possible." Many schools have offenders right down the street.

Principals that were approached about this issue declined to be interviewed in three out of the four schools and instead referred all questions to the Pitt County Schools' office.

JH Rose High School has one sex offender within 1,000 feet of the school. The high school's next nearest offender is within 0.2 miles and four sex offenders live within a half of a mile. All their offenses were against children and two of the convicted offenders were recidivist, or repeat offenders, which makes the need to distance these offenders even more important.

Heather Thompson, the public relations officer for Pitt County Schools, said, "We do not post the addresses or the pictures of the offenders around the schools in that we have implemented procedures that prohibit unauthorized persons from entering school grounds."

South Greenville Elementary School is only 0.3 of a mile from the nearest sex offender. Seven sex offenders live within a half mile of the elementary school. Five out of their seven offenses were against children. The other two offenses involved 18- and 19-year-old rape victims.

Sadie Saulter Elementary School has its nearest offender approximately 0.23 miles from school grounds. There are 13 sex offenders within less than half a mile of the elementary school. Two of their 13 offenses included rape offenses against children and the other 11 offenses were also against young children. Ten of the sex offenders are repeat offenders.

Although these two schools do not have any offenders within 1,000 feet, it still warrants concern from the children's parents.

Thompson said, "The principals in the schools look at the protocols that are in place and will shift or adjust any changes that are necessary to keep the children safe."

Principal Cheryl P. Olmsted from W.H. Robinson Elementary School, said, "A printout of all the local sex offenders we receive has been issued out to all the parents so they will be included and know we are working hard to keep their children safe."

W.H. Robinson Elementary has its nearest offender within 1,000 feet of school grounds. The next closest offender is only 0.18 miles from there and two more sex offenders live less than half of a mile from the elementary school. Their offenses, again, were all crimes against young children.

Olmsted also noted, "None of our students walk home because the school isn't walking distance from their homes. We do have some bicycle riders but they are cautiously monitored."

Olmsted had no comment when asked if she was aware that most of the sex offenders listed were repeat offenders.

Officials with the Pitt County Sheriff's office are aware that sex offenders reside within 1,000 feet of local schools. These offenders are permitted to live there because they lived there prior to the new law.

Sheriff Mac Manning said, "There is nothing we can say or do to make these sex offenders move out of their homes. It is their right to live there; we cannot force them out."

"It's not our job to tell them where they can live. It's merely our job to say 'that's OK or that's not OK,'" added Greenville Police Chief Joe Simonowich.

The time that elementary school staff is worried or extra careful with the children's safety is during recess when all the children are outside.

Thompson said, "Many precautions are being taken to provide safety to the local Pitt County Schools. We are eventually going to require all staff members of the elementary schools to wear orange jackets during recess so that it is easy for the children to find us and so that it is easy for the staff to find each other."

Sooner than later, officials in North Carolina will draw maps of the county showing where convicted sex offenders are prevented from living, and will notify the offenders. Simonowich said he didn't know exactly how many people would be affected, but said it is "significant."

Offenders found living in the restricted areas can be charged with an aggravated misdemeanor, a crime that carries a possible two-year prison term.

Simonowich said offenders will be given a "reasonable time" to move before prosecuting them, although he hadn't determined how long that would be.

Eventually a GPS tracking system will be in place for all sex offenders, even the offenders who eventually go out of the registry.

"We will use it and be vigorous in our enforcement of it," Manning said. "We have got to make sure all sex offenders are tracked."

The schools can do much to provide a safe and comfortable environment for children. They can inform parents about what is or isn't going on around or close to school grounds.

Although sex offenders are required to register with their local police department regardless of whether they live within 1,000 feet of a local school or day care center, it's a difficult law for police to enforce.

Overall, Manning said, 1,000 feet is "just one tool in a very large tool bag," and it does not enable police to exert complete control over sex offenders. "I think that is an extremely misleading perception that people have," he said. "We would have been far better off with lifetime parole or probation than with lifetime of a tracking device or the 1,000 foot law."

Based on the number of repeat offenders, it is evident that they must be carefully monitored. Some experts say it is not a problem that is easily dealt with by psychoanalysis or through counseling.

Gerald Robertson, a Virginia defense attorney who has represented accused sex offenders, said, "There is no easy fix to this issue and it is one we all must be very vigilant in this law's strict enforcement and execution."

Loannsha Revis contributed to this story.