

Milwaukee bears unfair brunt of sex offender placements, Murphy says

Data shows 90% of county's sex offenders live in Milwaukee

By Don Walker of the Journal Sentinel

May 25, 2014

Legislation enacted by many Milwaukee County communities that restricts residency for sex offenders is having a disproportionate impact on the city of Milwaukee.

That is the assessment of Common Council President Michael Murphy, who with the help of the city's Legislative Reference Bureau analyzed sex offender registry data collected by the state.

Murphy said the data shows that as of mid-February, 21,669 offenders were on the registry statewide. Of that number, 2,399 sex offenders were living in Milwaukee County, and 2,138 of those were living in the city of Milwaukee.

"It is apparent that the City of Milwaukee has become the primary location for the placement of sex offenders within Milwaukee County," Murphy wrote in a letter to state Corrections Secretary Edward F. Wall.

According to the analysis, 14 of the 19 Milwaukee County municipalities have ordinances on the books that restrict sex offender residency.

"The establishment of (the) restrictions by suburban communities may be the reason for the concentration of sex offenders residing in the City of Milwaukee," Murphy said.

Moreover, an analysis by the Legislative Reference Bureau showed that the number of sex offenders living in two Milwaukee ZIP codes had increased since municipalities in Milwaukee County voted to enact restrictive ordinances.

According to the analysis, the total number of registered sex offenders living within the 53207 and 53215 ZIP codes in 2007 was 161. Seven years later, the total number of sex offenders in those two ZIP codes had increased to 233, a 44.7% jump.

"Your department should support enacting state law to require that sex offender residency restriction be applied statewide to remove the patchwork of varying residency restriction laws," Murphy wrote to Wall. Murphy also recommended that placement of sex offenders in the city be discontinued until a fair solution can be found.

Two bills — one in 2005 and one in 2007 — attempted to level the playing field statewide but did not pass.

"Inaction by the State of Wisconsin and the Department of Corrections... indicates that it does not fully appreciate the negative impacts on the health, safety and welfare of Milwaukee residents that could result from the continued concentration of sex offenders residing in the City of Milwaukee," Murphy said.

Grace Roberts, director of sex offender programs for the Department of Corrections, suggested to Murphy that he speak with local and elected officials to change laws governing residency restriction ordinances.

Murphy's data came from an open records request filed by the Milwaukee city clerk's office with the state's sex offender program.

In Milwaukee County, only Whitefish Bay, River Hills, Shorewood, Milwaukee and Hales Corners have no restrictions. The remainder have restrictions that prohibit sex offenders from living 500 feet to 2,000 feet away from such places as schools or other educational institutions.

Murphy's request also found that because the Wisconsin Sex Offender Registry is updated frequently, "no reports of the registry are retained for historical purposes." The Legislative Reference Bureau had some partial historical data for ZIP codes 53207 and 53215, which is used to compare with current state sex offender data to calculate the increase in the number of sex offenders living in those two areas.

Murphy suggested a records retention policy should be established.

The review of data also found numerous examples of inaccurate or incomplete records for certain sex offenders. "The integrity of the Wisconsin Sex Offender Registry is being undermined by the lack of historical data and the errors and inconsistencies identified in the current data," Murphy said.

Roberts responded that prior to April 28, the agency had used a database dating back to 1998. "The database was limited in its capabilities for capturing historical numbers of registrants and lists of sex offender registrant information," she said.

Since April 28, she said, the agency unveiled a new database that includes the ability to generate sex offender registry information. The new database also has a process to check for the validity of addresses.

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