

Iowa County Attorneys Association

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STATEMENT ON SEX OFFENDER RESIDENCY RESTRICTIONS IN IOWA

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The Iowa County Attorneys Association believes that the 2,000 foot residency restriction for persons who have been convicted of sex offenses involving minors does not provide the protection that was originally intended and that the cost of enforcing the requirement and the unintended effects on families of offenders warrant replacing the restriction with more effective protective measures.

The ICAA has the following observations concerning the current restriction:

1. Research shows that there is no correlation between residency restrictions and reducing sex offenses against children or improving the safety of children.
2. Research does not support the belief that children are more likely to be victimized by strangers at the covered locations than at other places.
3. Residency restrictions were intended to reduce sex crimes against children by strangers who seek access to children at the covered locations. Those crimes are tragic, but very rare. In fact, 80 to 90 percent of sex crimes against children are committed by a relative or acquaintance who has some prior relationship with the child and access to the child that is not impeded by residency restrictions. Only parents can effectively impede that kind of access.

4. Law enforcement has observed that the residency restriction is causing offenders to become homeless, to change residences without notifying authorities of their new locations, to register false addresses or to simply disappear. If they do not register, law enforcement and the public do not know where they are living. The resulting damage to the reliability of the sex offender registry does not serve the interests of public safety.
5. There is no demonstrated protective effect of the residency requirement that justifies the huge draining of scarce law enforcement resources in the effort to enforce the restriction.
6. The categories of crimes included in the restriction are too broad, imposing the restriction on many offenders who present no known risk to children in the covered locations.
7. A significant number of offenders have married or have been reunited with their victims; and, in those cases, the residency restriction is imposed on the victims as well as the offenders.
8. Many offenders have families whose lives are unfairly and unnecessarily disrupted by the restriction, causing children to be pulled out of school and away from friends, and causing spouses to lose jobs and community connections.
9. Many offenders are physically or mentally disabled but are prohibited from living with family members or others on whom they rely for assistance with daily needs.
10. The geographic areas included in the prohibited 2,000 foot zones are so extensive that realistic opportunities to find affordable housing are virtually eliminated in most communities. The lack of transportation in areas not covered by the restriction limits employment opportunities. The adoption of even more restrictive ordinances by cities and counties exacerbates the shortage of housing possibilities.

11. The residency restriction has no time limit; and, for many offenders, the restriction lasts beyond the requirement that they be listed on the sex offender registry. For this reason, there are many offenders who are subject to the residency restriction but who are not required to inform law enforcement of their place of residence, making enforcement nearly impossible.
12. There is no accommodation in the current statute for persons on parole or probation supervision. These offenders are already monitored and their living arrangements approved. The restriction causes many supervised residential placements to be unavailable even though they may be the most appropriate and safest locations for offenders to live.
13. Many prosecutors have observed that the numerous negative consequences of the lifetime residency restriction has caused a reduction in the number of confessions made by offenders in cases where defendants usually confess after disclosure of the offense by the child. In addition, there are more refusals by defendants charged with sex offenses to enter into plea agreements. Plea agreements are necessary in many cases involving child victims in order to protect the children from the trauma of the trial process. This unforeseen result seriously jeopardizes the welfare of child victims and decreases the number of convictions of sex offenders to accurate charges. Consequently, many offenders will not be made fully accountable for their acts and will not be required to complete appropriate treatment or other rehabilitative measures that would enhance the safety of children. Similar unintended negative effects often accompany well-intended efforts to increase prison sentences with mandatory provisions.

14. The drastic reduction in the availability of appropriate housing, along with the forced removal of many offenders from established residences, is contrary to well-established principles of treatment and rehabilitation of sex offenders. Efforts to rehabilitate offenders and to minimize the rate of reoffending are much more successful when offenders are employed, have family and community connections, and have a stable residence. These goals are severely impaired by the residency restriction, compromising the safety of children by obstructing the use of the best known corrections practices.

For these reasons, the Iowa County Attorneys Association supports the replacement of the residency restriction with more effective measures that do not produce the negative consequences that have attended the current statute. For example, the ICAA would support a measure that includes the following:

- A statute creating defined protected areas that sex offenders would be prohibited from entering except in limited and safe circumstances. Such areas might include schools, parks, libraries, and childcare facilities.
- Entrance into the protected areas would be allowed for activities involving an offender's own child with advance notice and approval from those in charge of the location.
- The restriction should cover offenses against "children" (under age 14), rather than "minors" (under 18).
- The statute should specifically preempt local ordinances that attempt to create additional restrictions on sex offenders. Such ordinances result in a variety of inconsistent rules and promote apprehension among local authorities that they

must act to defend themselves from the perceived effects of the actions of other communities.

- Most important, any restriction that carries the expectation that it can be effectively enforced must be applied to a more limited group of offenders than is covered by the current residency restriction. This group should be identified by a competent assessment performed by trained persons acting on behalf of the state. The assessment should be directed at applying the statutory restriction only to those offenders that present an actual risk in public areas to children with whom the offender has no prior relationship

Other measures that might be considered would include educational programs for young children aimed at keeping them safe from all offenders. Illinois has begun such a program.

The observations of Iowa prosecutors are not motivated by sympathy for those committing sex offenses against children, but by our concern that legislative proposals designed to protect children must be both effective and enforceable. Anything else lets our children down.

The Iowa County Attorneys Association strongly urges the General Assembly and the Governor to act promptly to address the problems created by the 2,000 foot residency restriction by replacing the restriction with measures that more effectively protect children, that reduce the unintended unfairness to innocent persons and that make more prudent use of law enforcement resources. The ICAA stands ready to assist in any way with this effort.