

TESTIMONY ON MEGAN'S LAW

BY

ROSALIE DANCHANKO

PRESENTED BY

DEBBIE BOWERS

FEBRUARY 21, 1995

Good afternoon, I am Debbie Bowers and I am here this afternoon on behalf of Rosalie Danchanko, Executive Director of Victim Services in Cambria, Somerset and Bedford counties. Rosalie has been with this agency since 1983 as its first director. The agency provided services to over 3,000 victims of violent crime during last year. Sixty percent of the caseload are victims of sexual assault. Also Victim Services provided over 320 educational programs on the effects of crime, crime prevention and resources to help victims of crime to over 8,000 people.

Education is the best tool, we believe, to fighting crime. In working with the crime of sexual molestation, especially with a child we find that this act disrupts the development of a child, emotionally, psychological and physically. We all have the potential to be victims, but we also have the capability to be an offender.

As parents, we have to ask ourselves - do you really know your neighbor? Are you sure you should trust your child with that nice person across the street? One of the first things I hear people say after charges of child molestation are made public is, "I can't believe that he/she would do such a thing, he/she is such a nice guy/girl.

As a parent and a professional who has worked with victims of child sexual assault for eleven years, I am very cautious before I let my children be with other people. I would not hesitate to call the police to find out if they have any concern or reports about an

individual who has moved into the neighborhood.

- * Therefore, it is my belief sex offenders should not be allowed to return into the community unless they are registered with the police, managed and supervised by the courts and in a treatment program.
- * The victim should be given notification of the offender's release.

Community notification of sex offenders provides the community with a false sense of security. When focus is placed on the convicted offender, my concern is that the false sense of security will cause us to forget that we also have to be aware of the offenders in our neighborhood who haven't been identified or caught. It is known, that only a small percentage of offenders are convicted.

Our children are vulnerable and they deserve to be protected and given every opportunity to grow up in a healthy and safe environment.

Victims of sexual assault suffer silently. It is the victim's life sentence. Their scars are not visible to the eye, but the emotional pain they endured by the molestation will be with them for a lifetime.

A child will have a more difficult time dealing with the trauma because the child may not be able to understand what has happened and why her/his life has suddenly been disrupted. Sexual assault is the abuse of power or thrust by an adult. This abuse of trust is the ultimate violation.

We have to protect our children from the unknown offender as

well as the known offender.

Prevention education is the most effective means for improving the safety of our children - not notifying neighbors of a released offender.

Children do remember the messages that they have learned from Victim Services and from our school programs. We have heard from the fourteen year old child who remembers our puppet play on "Good Touch/Bad Touch" that they saw in second grade and they remembered our presence in the classroom when they reached seventh grade. We teach the children that they are the "boss" of their bodies and that they can say "no" to touches that make them feel uncomfortable. Also we tell them to "tell someone and keep telling until you get help".

A child who is assertive and can say no, is our best defense against a child molester. Child molesters have a difficult time relating to adults. They do not want to be rejected and they want power and control. Children are typically told not to say no to an adult - but we have found when a child does assert his/herself that a possible victimization can be averted.

Therefore labeling a few offenders diverts attention from need for education of young children to protect them from sexual offenders.

This issue of registering sex offenders points to the classic conflict of interests and rights. Sex offenders have their individual rights to liberty and privacy and to begin anew, versus

the community's right to know and protect our children.

Offenders rights are constitutionally guaranteed and most of we can list them off the top of our heads:

- * Innocent until proven guilty.
- * Right to due process.
- * Right to face your accuser.
- * Right against self incrimination.
- * Right to a jury trial.

Victims deserve constitutional rights. Victims deserve:

- * The right to be informed
- * The right to be present
- * The right to be heard.

The right to be informed includes the right to receive education on personal safety.

In summary, we do support this bill with the notification of the victim and notification to the police, but we do not support the part about community notification. We believe that education is a more effective means for improving the safety of our children than labeling the known sex offender.

Thank You!