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Transient sex offenders living in tents

Highway workers get permission to clear encampment

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SHELTON -- A team of Department of Transportation workers stopped work recently when they came upon an encampment of transient sex offenders near a rural intersection here.

State Department of Corrections spokesman Veltry Johnson said sex offenders commonly live in tent cities stretching all along the Interstate 5 corridor.

"They have served their time and paid their time, and we have no choice but to let them go," Johnson said. "Their only prerequisite is that they must register with local authorities in the county where they reside. If they have no place to live, they're required to tell us that much."

Department of Social Health Services spokesman Steve Williams said some sex offenders have been registering as transients as a loophole from registering their actual addresses.

"We don't have any control, nor do we supervise them. They're not even under our jurisdiction," Williams said.

And Lloyd Brown, DOT spokesman, said finding transient areas is very common for the department, and they usually clear the areas to make them visible and unattractive for transients to come back.

"We had no idea this was a batch of sex offenders, however," he said.

In King County, thousands of residents turned out at public hearings recently to protest the potential sites of transitional housing for sex offenders in their areas. However, current law allows sex offenders who have been freed already to set up tent cities in those very same neighborhoods.

"We do not control where freed sex offenders are allowed to live," Johnson said. "They have the right to set up their residence anywhere they like -- just like any other freed convict."

Yesterday in Shelton, two tents, a tarp and wood covered by plastic remain on a busy intersection along state Route 3. A large flat basin existed amid large evergreens to allow at least six to eight more tents. On the ground, a mirror lay face up and a television tray was planted, waiting for its owner to come back. Litter and debris cluttered the ground.

A 1999 law requires that all transient sex offenders register with their local police authorities.

Johnson said the Mason County Sheriff's Department was aware that "all levels of sex offenders were living at that encampment."

An auto-repair crew at WagenWerks, an auto-body shop overlooking the tent city, said they recalled seeing men on bikes travel up and down their road and going to the tent city. At night, fires and lights could be seen, but they said the residents weren't nuisances. They were not aware any of the transients were sex offenders.

According to a DOT spokesman, from Jan. 21 to 22, the workers had been instructed by a member of the Department of Corrections' Shelton office to stop clearing away brush and trees in order to preserve the site along state Route 3 and U.S. 101. When the Transportation Department contacted DOC supervisors, however, they were given permission to resume.