

State Justice understaffed, overworked

Saturday, February 1, 2003

From The Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO -- A staff of 13 in Sacramento maintains the state's sex offender registry, typing in data mailed in by police, verifying fingerprint cards and scanning photographs into the database.

Last year alone, they handled more than 106,000 updates, Justice Department spokesman Mike Van Winkle said. They also work to make the database more accurate and useful to the public and police, and when people call 1-900-448-3000 for Megan's Law searches, they're the ones who respond to the calls.

"They appear to be an overworked, understaffed agency," said Detective Mark Stiefvater in Pleasant Hill.

Police in that Bay Area suburb say they know where 33 of their 34 sex offenders are, yet the state registry shows nine who haven't been heard from in more than a year.

Part of the problem is that only 15 percent of California's local law enforcement agencies update all their sex offender information by computer, as required since 2000, Van Winkle said.

That may explain why, eight months later, the state database still didn't reflect registrations mailed by police in Lone, a Sierra foothills town with two sex offenders.

"I guess it just takes a while for DOJ to get the data entered," said Lone Police Chief Lou Pietronave.

Repeat child molester Richard Flick, who was released from Atascadero State Hospital in 1999, didn't show up in the state Megan's Law database earlier this month, but his registration was current in the National Crime Information Center database. Why the disparity between the state and federal systems?

"I couldn't tell you the answer to that," said Norm Pierce, manager of California's Violent Crime Information Center, which oversees the Megan's Law database.

Another problem is that out-of-date records actually could be multiple listings of the same person under variations of the same name. If someone enters a record without checking first to see whether the person is already in the database, "it just ends up being two records," Van Winkle said. "Hopefully, it's caught the next time he comes in."

Many police departments don't even have one full-time staffer dedicated to confirming the whereabouts of sex offenders. And a lack of training and high turnover among people entering data for local agencies doesn't help.

"We've shown it's not perfect and a lot of people aren't there," Van Winkle said, referring to state data showing that the current whereabouts of at least 33,000 ex-convicts are unknown. "We do the best we can with the resources we've got."