



Community members call for tougher laws for sex offenders

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GREENVILLE, Ky. (AP) - With a man jailed on charges of killing a 16-year-old Muhlenberg County girl, some community members called for reforms in the justice system to prevent the tragedy from recurring.

Robert Keith Woodall, 22, had served more than three years in prison after pleading guilty to two charges of sexual abuse of a young girl in 1992.

Now he faces rape, murder and kidnapping charges for the slaying of 16-year-old Sarah Hansen. The cheerleader's body was pulled from a Muhlenberg County lake last weekend. Woodall was arrested by Kentucky State Police Tuesday night.

Calling the girl's abduction, rape and murder "the most vicious, brutal thing that's ever been done in this county," Greenville attorney and state Rep. Brent Yonts said he wants the legislature to take up the issue of public notification when convicted sex offenders are released into communities.

"People in this town and this county are mad as hell," Yonts said.

Yonts said he spoke to Gov. Paul Patton on Wednesday and asked him to add the issue of mandatory notification to the agenda if he calls a special session. Yonts also questioned the wisdom of releasing sex offenders early.

Woodall was sentenced to five years on two counts of first-degree sexual abuse, but was released after more than 3 years, earning early release through good behavior and other measures. He was not paroled. He also did not complete a voluntary treatment program for sex offenders.

Yonts questioned whether sex offenders should ever have their

sentences reduced for good behavior, and whether felons convicted of violent crimes against a person should ever be eligible for parole.

"It's tragic that a guy who is a child molester was let out after 3 1/2 years of a five-year term, particularly after he quit a counseling program," Yonts said. "That's a failure of the sentencing system."

Instead of completing a voluntary two-year treatment program to become eligible for parole, many prisoners - like Woodall - refuse or quit treatment and cut their prison time through good behavior, said David Higgs, assistant public information officer at the Green River Correctional Complex.

Imprisoned sex offenders have little incentive to receive treatment if their sentence is five years or fewer, said Barbara Jones, general counsel for the Kentucky Justice Cabinet.

Parole Board Chairwoman Helen Howard-Hughes said, "One of the very frustrating things about the board is that when we review people that are serving sentences of five years or less for sex crimes, they are not likely to go through the treatment. Then they go out and re-offend."

Criminologists say sex offenders are more likely than most criminals to repeat their offenses, but treatment can reduce repeat offenses.

Kathi Peterson, who heads the state sex offender program, said a study to be published soon will show that between 1990 and 1995, sex offenders who didn't complete Kentucky's treatment program before being released from prison were arrested three times as often for new sex crimes as inmates who had completed treatment in prison. Nine percent of the untreated offenders were arrested on new sex charges during that time, compared with 3 percent of those treated.

Experts say the repeat-offense rate is actually much higher, but offenders are often not caught or the victims don't press charges.

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