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PUBLIC SAFETY

Revised sex offender registry coming soon

Public will be able to find sex offenders' work and school addresses online.

By [Joshunda Sanders](#)

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

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The Texas Department of Public Safety plans to update its online sex offender registry this spring to let people know where offenders work or go to school.

The move is part of a site overhaul.

The registry update, which is to include conviction history and other elements in addition to employer and school information, will cost the state \$1.2 million and be paid for with federal grant money, said Tom Vinger, an agency spokesman.

Anyone can go to the state's site to look up a person by name or ZIP code. The information includes physical descriptions, photos, offenses, aliases and legal status. People also can use a map to find sex offenders who live in a particular neighborhood.

When the registry is revised, sex offender records will also show complete registration histories, former addresses and conviction information in Texas and out of state.

If a sex offender has an occupational license, that will show up, too, Vinger said.

People will be able to sign up for e-mail notification when a sex offender moves into their ZIP code and when that offender's information is updated or changed.

The addition of sex offenders' employers is to comply with a 2007 state attorney general opinion that said people should have access to such information.

Other states can include sex offenders' employers in registration records, but only three do: Missouri, Maine and Alaska.

Under the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006, all states will be required to gather

employer information for sex offenders by June 2009.

The agency's revision is unrelated to the federal law, Vinger said. It was planning a rewrite when the attorney general opinion was released.

Employers' associations did not comment on the changes.

But Ruth Epstein, a spokeswoman for the American Civil Liberties Union of Central Texas, said people's ability to find sex offenders in their workplaces or classrooms raises privacy concerns and could send offenders who are trying to get treatment into hiding.

"What happens to a criminal who can't work?" because he is being harassed, she asked. "He goes underground, and he commits more criminal activity."

Her colleague, Rebecca Bernhardt, policy development director for the ACLU, echoed those sentiments.

"The overall goal is to have less recidivism for sex offenders, but putting their employer addresses online compromises their ability to work," Bernhardt said. "Undermining their ability to keep a job is a downside for public safety."

Bernhardt said that the accuracy of such information, considering some of the problems sex offender registries have been criticized for in recent years, could be questionable.

Registries have had outdated, limited or incorrect information about some offenders.

At least one man was wrongly labeled a sex offender and feared that he would be targeted by a neighbor in Austin after an erroneous notification letter went out to his neighbors in October.

Most law enforcement agencies in Texas link to the state's database, which automatically updates daily, but Austin police used a different system to track sex offenders for years.

In 2006, the American-Statesman found that the Austin Police Department's sex offender registry had outdated information or wrong photographs for some sex offenders. In August, the local database was replaced with a link to the state agency's Web site.

Sgt. Greg Moss of the Police Department's sex offender apprehension and registration unit said the department decided to link directly to the agency's site to give the public more current information.

"It just didn't update as quickly," Moss said of the police-run Web site. "We also took it down to reduce the impression of inaccuracies."

The department did not have an estimate of the number of visitors to its registry.

At least 5 million unique visitors go to the criminal history section of the state's database each month, most to the sex offender portion, Vinger said. This year, top

tenreviews.com, a Web site that reviews online registries, listed the state agency's sex offender registry as the fourth-best in the nation.

Texas Department of Public Safety sex

offender database: <https://records.txdps>

[.state.tx.us/DPS_WEB/Sor/index.aspx](https://www.state.tx.us/DPS_WEB/Sor/index.aspx)

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