



TRACKING REGISTERED SEX OFFENDERS' USE OF TECHNOLOGY

by Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott

IN AN AGE WHEN CRIMINALS ARE EMPLOYING mobile and Internet technology to commit crime, law enforcement officers cannot afford to get behind the technological curve. Authorities are getting new tools that will help them protect Texans more effectively and prevent more crime.

During the last Legislative session, I worked with legislators to improve law enforcement's ability to monitor registered sex offenders. Thanks to a newly enacted law, keeping track of convicted sex offenders will be a little easier.

Under Senate Bill 689 – which was authored by Sen. Florence Shapiro, Plano and Rep. Aaron Peña, Edinburg – sex offenders must provide their online identifiers and mobile phone numbers to the state's sex offender database. The newly required information includes profiles on social networking Web sites like MySpace or Facebook, where many sex offenders

create accounts so they can interact with children.

Before SB 689 took effect on Sept. 1, registered sex offenders were only statutorily required to provide traditional information, such as home addresses, land-line phone numbers and places of employment. The absence of e-mail addresses, mobile phone numbers or Internet identifiers meant the Office of the Attorney General (OAG) and other law enforcement agencies often had to rely on low-tech methods to track down convicted sex offenders who accessed the Internet in violation of their parole.

Paroled criminals around the state attempt to use the anonymity of the Internet to disguise their identities, arrange meetings with children or maintain social networking profiles. Recently, the OAG's Fugitive Unit arrested Gary Dee Gause, of Fort Worth, after he maintained a MySpace account in violation of his parole. He

was paroled after serving 25 years in prison for sexually assaulting two women in 1982 – one in Harris County and the other in Tarrant County.

The Fugitive Unit also arrested Michael Jermain Harris, of Houston, for maintaining a MySpace account and Facebook account in violation of his parole. After Harris' 2004 conviction for attempted sexual assault a 14-year-old girl, he was paroled and prohibited from using the Internet.

Fugitive Unit investigators also arrested a third suspect, Brian William Yoas, of Austin, for violating his parole by logging onto the Internet and maintaining a MySpace account. In 2005, Yoas was convicted in Williamson County of possessing and intending to distribute child pornography.

To date, our office has arrested more than 30 sex offenders who violated their parole by logging onto MySpace, which recently revealed that 90,000 of its members were registered

sex offenders. At least 5,000 sex offenders have also been discovered on Facebook's membership lists.

The new law's mobile phone requirement is equally important – not just because it helps track down parole violators, but also because many predators use mobile phones to prey on children. Unfortunately, mobile phones are being used to send text messages to potential victims, transmit explicit photos and access the Internet, where children can fall victim to other types of exploitation.

When criminals are exploiting technology as fast as it is developed, authorities cannot be bound to low-tech law enforcement techniques. SB 689 gives the long arm of law enforcement the maximum possible reach in order to hold registered sex offenders accountable. As history has shown, cooperative, creative law enforcement can – and we will – overcome even the most cutting edge criminals.