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State senators fast-track sex offender legislation

March 3, 2014 | By Tonya Alanez and Dana Williams, Staff writers

TALLAHASSEE — State senators are poised to pass landmark legislation aimed at better protecting Floridians from rapists and child molesters Tuesday, the first day of the annual Legislative session.

"I don't want to let one more day go by without making Florida scorched earth for sexual predators," said Senate President Don Gaetz, R-Niceville.

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The package of four bills would toughen sex-crime sentences, increase community monitoring, and keep more of the most dangerous offenders confined after their prison terms end. It would provide the most comprehensive overhaul of sex offender legislation in more than a decade.

Gaetz said he will convene his chamber immediately after the pomp and circumstance of opening day dwindles down and take the "unusual step" of moving the bills right through from debate and a preliminary vote to what he is certain will be final passage.

"We will break precedent, we will break tradition, we will bring the bills to the floor immediately," Gaetz said. "I don't want one more child to be a victim of violent sexual predators. I want to move these bills as quickly as we can. We've already waited too long."

This action comes in response to the Sun Sentinel's "Sex Predators Unleashed" investigative series in August that revealed nearly 600 sex offenders had attacked again after the state had a chance to stop them.

House Speaker Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel, said the legislation is a priority in his chamber as well, and he aims to take it up during the second week of session.

To ensure quick passage in its chamber, the House Judiciary Committee on Monday rolled seven of its bills into the four Senate bills and perfectly aligned the language so that they would match.

"There is a lot of questions in my mind whether there is value to treatment, but I know there is value to incarceration because when people are incarcerated they're not reoffending," said State Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Fort Walton Beach, chairman of the House Criminal Justice Committee. "And for the worst of the worst, I think we should lock them up and throw away the key."

Sen. Eleanor Sobel, a Hollywood Democrat, agreed.

"These sociopaths are going to be kept locked up for a longer time," she said. "There's no medical cure, there's no psychological cure for some of their behavior, and I believe that until we have a cure, we should keep them locked up."

The Sun Sentinel documented shocking failures in a law that allows Florida to keep sex offenders locked up after they finish their prison sentences if prosecutors can prove they are likely to reoffend.

Named in memory of a South Florida boy who was raped and murdered, the Jimmy Ryce law requires the

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state to evaluate convicted sex criminals before their release and to recommend predators — those with a mental disorder that makes them likely to reoffend — for lockup at a treatment center in Central Florida.

The newspaper found fewer predators were recommended for confinement in recent years, and safeguards within the program had broken down at every level.

The investigation was published two months after the June rape and strangulation of an 8-year-old Jacksonville girl, Cherish Perrywinkle. Her accused killer was a registered sex offender released from jail just three weeks earlier.

"The issue is very raw and very personal for the people I represent in northeast Florida," said Sen. Rob Bradley, an Orange Park Republican whose district includes Jacksonville. "We've lost two young girls at the hands of these monsters since 2009."

The bill sponsored by Bradley, SB 526, enhances sentences for some adult-on-minor sex offenses and would require judges to hand out sentences requiring some offenders to serve either house arrest or probation after they are released from prison.

"This law ensures that if they are not in prison, then they are being watched very carefully by law enforcement," Bradley said.

Bradley's bill also includes a provision put forward by Sen. Lizbeth Benacquisto, R-Ft. Myers, that would waive statute of limitations on certain sex crimes.

Lawmakers vowed to close loopholes and began holding hearings in September, gathering suggestions from prosecutors, police and mental health experts.

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What the four bills include

- SB 522, introduced by Sen. Denise Grimsley, R-Sebring: Requires the Department of Children & Families, which runs the predator program, to be notified when offenders are rearrested and convicted of misdemeanors or felonies. Requires the department to notify sheriffs when offenders are released from confinement, and allows the team that evaluates offenders to consult with a prosecutor, a police officer and a victim advocate.

- SB 524, introduced by Sen. Eleanor Sobel, D-Hollywood: Requires evaluators to recommend confinement if at least two people on the evaluation team vote for confinement. Requires schools and colleges to inform staff and students about the sex offender website.

- SB 526, introduced by Sen. Rob Bradley, R-Orange Park: Increases minimum sentences for some adult-on-minor sex offenses, and prohibits early release from prison for good behavior. Requires post-release supervision for some sex offenses.

- SB 528, introduced by Senator Greg Evers, R-Baker: Requires more information from registered sex offenders.

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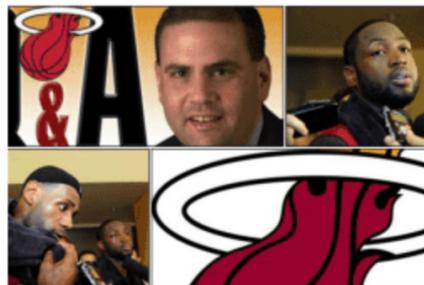
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