

# Gov. Rick Scott signs sexual predator laws

**JACKSONVILLE, Fla. -**

Gov. Rick Scott signed four landmark bills Tuesday designed to better protect children in Florida from sexual predator.

"Today I am proud to sign this legislation for all the children who have been terribly affected," he said. "I hope these measures and the awareness that we are bringing today will make a difference for generations to come."

Diena Thompson, mother of 8-year-old murder victim Somer Thompson, was in Tallahassee to witness the signing. She lobbied for the bill and promised she would be there when the law was signed.

Members of Jacksonville's Justice Coalition and sexual abuse survivors were also in attendance.

The bill signing coincides with the first day of both National Sexual Assault Awareness Month and National Child Abuse Prevention Month.

Thompson knows all too well the pain sexual predators can cause. Somer Thompson was abducted and killed by 26-year-old Jarred Harrell while walking home from school in Orange Park.

"One of the things I said at the beginning about this is that if I could have anything out of this, I would have Somer's story essentially go down in history," Thompson said.

She turned her pain into progress, and has lobbied for stricter laws in Florida since she lost her daughter. On Tuesday she got to watch some of her hard work pay off as Scott signs new sexually violent predator legislation.

"I absolutely think it is going to work. I do not believe that we can just stop here and not do anything else," Thompson said. "We need to keep looking at our laws and going over things and seeing what loopholes there are available to people to get through. We also need to partner with people for prevention and educating the adults and our children."

State lawmakers were also prompted into action by another Jacksonville case: the abduction and murder of Cherish Perrywinkle. Investigators said she died at the hands of Donald Smith, who has a long history of sexual crimes.

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"It means people are finally starting to listen and it doesn't just stop here changing the laws, we need to educate our kids and we need educate our parents," Thompson said.

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Also at Tuesday's signing was Lauren Book, a sexual abuse survivor and nationally recognized child protection advocate who walks 1,500 miles across Florida to create awareness every year.

"We have to do everything we can to give law enforcement the tools to protect the public against these monsters," said Sen. Rob Bradley.

Bradley sponsored one of the new laws, which restricts offenders from earning reduced jail sentences for good behavior. The other laws force sexual predators to disclose more personal information, and closes the loopholes that would help them avoid civil commitment after serving jail time.

"It sends a clear message to the monsters out there and the victims that this behavior is intolerable," Bradley said.

Scott signed four bills that are part of the Legislature's "protecting Florida's vulnerable" initiative:

### **CS/CS/SB 522, substituted for CS/HB 7019:**

- Closes a loophole and creates a process by which persons sentenced to a term of imprisonment in a jail can be referred to the Department of Children and Families (DCF) for civil commitment; raises standards and increases accountability in the DCF evaluation process for determining whether an offender meets criteria for commitment to the Sexually Violent Predator Program.
- Requires DCF to notify victims, the Department of Corrections (DOC), the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE), and the sheriffs in the county in which the person intends to reside or, if unknown, in the county in which the person was last convicted, of the release of all persons in the custody of DCF – not just those committed as sexually violent predators

### **CS/SB 524, substituted for CS/CS/HB 7021:**

- Creates enhanced standards for the membership of the DCF multidisciplinary team (MDT), whose duty is to assess whether convicted sexual offenders meet the clinical definition of a sexually violent predator, and requires additional annual training for all members of MDT; Allows for civil commitment consideration when at least two of the five MTD members feel it is appropriate and necessary
- The bill also requires private and public colleges and universities to inform students and employees about FDLE's sexual predator and offender registry website and toll-free telephone number that gives access to sexual predator and offender information

**CS/CS/SB 528, substituted for CS/CS/HB 7025:**

- Allows for better tracking of sex offenders/sexually violent predators by requiring them to provide expanded information to law enforcement, such as Internet usernames, tag numbers for all vehicles and passports

**CS/CS/CS/SB 526, substituted for CS/HB 7027:**

- Imposes a mandatory sentence of 50 years for those convicted of the rape or torture of children, seniors or individuals with a disability
- Expands the court's ability to allow use of service and therapy animals to aid a child victim or witness in a sexually motivated crime
- Eliminates current statutory time limitation for bringing a criminal prosecution for lewd or lascivious offenses committed upon or in the presence of a child less than 16 years old
- Eliminates incentive gain-time eligibility for sexually violent offenses
- Mandate community supervision of sex offenders who do not receive the maximum prison sentence through split sentencing, tolls community supervision period of SVPs in civil commitment to preserve the period of supervision until release from detention or commitment.

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