

# Small state unit hunting sex offenders on the run

## Unregistered face compliance and prosecution

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**Madison** - In the first few days of a new initiative to track down sex offenders who aren't registered with the state, Rich Cowan wasn't convinced the effort would see much success.

That's because the first two people who were found were located through coroners' offices.

"We thought we were off to a bad start," Cowan said. "That reputation stuck with us for a while."

But not for too long.

Since Cowan and a team of four other former law enforcement officials started working in October, 205 sex offenders who are supposed to be registered have been found.

(The first two were the only ones so far who were dead.)

Cowan is a former assistant police chief in Madison who is working with the state Department of Corrections and Office of Justice Assistance to boost the compliance rate among roughly 2,600 sex offenders who have failed to meet requirements to register with the state; in all, there are 18,000 registered sex offenders in Wisconsin.

The team is part of an initiative launched in September by Gov. Jim Doyle to do a better job of apprehending sex offenders and enforcing laws meant to monitor them. The effort included putting sex offenders' addresses online at [offender.doc.state.wi.us/public](http://offender.doc.state.wi.us/public) and increasing the number of registered sex offenders who are monitored by electronic devices.

Cowan is part of a five-member team of former law enforcement officers - together, they have 160 years of experience in police work - who were recruited to work part-time, logging on to computer databases and Internet resources to locate sex offenders who haven't kept the state apprised of their whereabouts.

### Sex Offenders Registry

#### By the Numbers

- **About 2,600:** Number of sex offenders who have failed to meet requirements to register with the state
- **18,000:** Total number of registered sex offenders in Wisconsin
- **6 years in prison and/or \$10,000:** Punishment for failing to keep the state informed about of their whereabouts.

To forward a tip to the Department of Corrections, call (877) 234-0085 or e-mail [docsafetips@doc.state.wi.us](mailto:docsafetips@doc.state.wi.us).

Failure to do so is a Class H felony punishable by up to six years in prison, a \$10,000 fine or both. Nearly 110 of those who have been found are facing prosecution for non-compliance, while the others had either been deported, are in prison in another state or had the charges dropped once they registered again.

Supporters of tougher restrictions on sex offenders say the team is off to a good start, but some would like to see increased monitoring of those who weren't in compliance.

Improving the compliance rates is necessary to keep the problem from getting out of control, said Sandy Maher-Johnson, co-president of Citizens for a Safe Wisconsin, which is pushing for tougher sex offender laws.

"With the increased mobility of our society, offenders can get lost," Maher-Johnson said.

Wisconsin's compliance rate is more than 86%, above the national standard of 75%, the department said. The state is aiming to get as close to 100% as it can, said David Steingraber, executive director of the Office of Justice Assistance.

Now that word is out the state is looking for them, sex offenders are on notice, and some are even coming forward voluntarily, he said

"Word is out on the street that they're not going to be ignored," Steingraber said.

The effort started in Dane County and in southeast Wisconsin, and now has moved west and north through 60 of the state's 72 counties. Because of the overriding public safety concern, the state decided to start with offenders who had committed child sex crimes or violent sex offenses.

Steve Reinstra said he's enjoyed getting a continued chance to use the detective skills he built during 34 years with the Madison Police Department.

"It's right down my alley," he said of the experience, which has included tracking Wisconsin sex offenders as far as Georgia, California and Ireland.

With a simple database search - he won't go into much detail to avoid giving away the team's tactics - Reinstra found a Wisconsin sex offender who had been picked up for drunken driving in Chula Vista, Calif. With a quick phone call to local law enforcement officials, Reinstra saw to it that the man was arrested and is being extradited back to Wisconsin for prosecution.

"They're surprised that we're still interested in where they are," Reinstra said of sex offenders who are found in other states.

Cowan, who retired after a 32-year career as a police officer, recounted a story about a Wisconsin sex offender who was tracked through work records to Kentucky. Once he

knew Wisconsin officials had found him, the man contacted them nearly every day to try to work out a deal to comply.

"It was kind of - 'humorous' is a bad word - but the intensity with which this guy was trying" was amazing, Cowan said. "We definitely had his attention."

Wisconsin requires that registered sex offenders be in compliance no matter where they live - even if they leave the state or are deported. Many other states require those convicted of sex offenses in other states to register, meaning that they can be considered non-compliant there, too.

Dane County District Attorney Brian Blanchard and his counterpart in La Crosse, Scott Horne, said they've seen an uptick in the number of referrals for prosecution since the effort was launched.

Having the resources and the information provided by the state team is instrumental in bringing sex offenders back into the system so they can be better watched, Horne said.

"The individuals who are making the effort to avoid compliance pose a greater danger" to public safety, Horne said.

Rep. Scott Suder (R-Abbotsford), an advocate of tougher laws for sex offenders, applauded the early success but said he would like to see the state use electronic monitoring devices - with global positioning technology - on those who are found after falling out of compliance with the registry.

"If we had an active GPS system, I don't believe we'd have this many sex offenders on the loose and we'd know exactly where they are," Suder said.