Megan’s Law a total failure; harms families, children

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By Daniel Walmer . . . It was every parent’s worst nightmare.

Seven-year-old Megan Kanka left her New Jersey home on July 29, 1994, for a summer afternoon bike ride around her neighborhood, but she never returned.

Instead, neighbor Jesse Timmendequas lured her into his home by promising her a puppy. He then raped and murdered her, dumping her body in a nearby park.

The murder sparked national outrage, not least because Kanka’s parents had never been told their neighbor had two previous convictions for sexual offences against small children. It also sparked a New Jersey law and then a 1996 federal law – Megan’s Law – requiring states to notify the public about sex offenders living in their neighborhoods.

Twenty years later, the names, pictures and addresses of registered sex offenders – including 218 who live, work or attend school in Lebanon County – can be found at the Pennsylvania State Police Megan’s Law Website. Such databases remain popular: a 2013 YouGov poll found that 71 percent of women and 52 percent of men believe it is “very important” to log all sex offender’s homes in the U.S.

However, advocates for offenders say registries continue to punish them even after they have served their sentence and even advocates for victims are lukewarm in their support.

“The intent of the Megan’s Law registry is commendable,” said Jenny Murphy-Shifflet, executive director of the Sexual Assault Recourse and Counseling Center of Lebanon County (SARCC). “I understand that its goal was to reduce sexual
violence. The reality is that we haven’t seen any outcomes indicating that these goals have been reached.”

**False sense of security**

One out of every 728 Lebanon County residents is a registered Megan’s Law offender, and most have committed violent sexual crimes like rape, indecent assault or sexual abuse of children. Those offenders are required to have their address and place of work listed on the registry for 15 years to life depending on the crime and amount of offenses.

If that seems like a scarily high number, Murphy-Shifflet said it’s probably far lower than the actual number of sexual offenders, many of whom have never been caught. In fact, that’s one of the shortcomings of Megan’s Law, she said – it can create a false sense of security to residents who don’t live near offenders.

“Megan’s Law is almost like the Scarlet letter. They think it’s going to be easy to identify (sexual offenders),” agreed Kristen Houser, chief public affairs officer for the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape. “The reality is, most offenders hide in plain sight.” (Read further for Sandy’s comments in the Lebanon Daily News)