

The women involved in sexual offense registry opposition: NARSOL, ACSOL, WAR, CAUTION CLICK

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By [Hallie Lieberman](#) . . . Sandy Rozek is the polar opposite of what comes to mind when you hear the word **activist**. A 78-year-old great-grandmother and retired high school English teacher who lives in Houston, Rozek is not woke, doesn't post on Twitter, and is involved in a movement you've probably never heard of.

Rozek works with the National Association for Rational Sexual Offense Laws (NARSOL). She is one of several women who lead an effort to oppose the unjust, irrational, and ineffective laws that continue to punish sex offenders long after they have served their time.

All 50 states have sex offender registries, and the U.S. Justice Department combines them in a single national

database. The information, which is available online to the general public, covers nearly 1 million people, whose crimes run the gamut from streaking to rape. In addition to the stigma imposed by that electronic pillory, registration comes with a panoply of restrictions that dictate where people can live and work, when and where they are allowed to travel, and even whether they're allowed to pick up their own children from school or take them to the park.

Reform organizations cite four major reasons for scaling back or eliminating the registry. They say it's unconstitutional, imposing ex post facto penalties that deprive registrants of rights everyone else enjoys; it's unscientific, relying on discredited beliefs about the danger that registrants pose; it's unforgiving, disrupting people's lives decades after they've completed their sentences; and it's indiscriminating, burdening not just the registrants themselves but their families and communities.

In this #MeToo moment, when everyone seems focused on holding men accountable for their sexual crimes, the civil rights of people who have committed such offenses tend to get short shrift. But both movements are spearheaded by women who are determined to change the national narrative about sex crimes.

Most of the registry reformers are in their 60s or 70s, with grown children and grandchildren. Unlike the founders of the #MeToo movement, they have not been featured in glossy magazine articles lauding their courage. But make no mistake: These women are brave. Many have been shunned by their friends and family because of their stances. Speaking out against the registry means aligning yourself with modern-day lepers, people who are viewed with fear and disgust by the vast majority of Americans.

Like many others in the movement, Rozek became a registry reformer because of a personal connection. About a decade ago, one of her friends was convicted of having an inappropriate

sexual relationship. While it didn't put her on the registry, she served a term of probation and had to complete a treatment program. "I really got started with it because of the treatment angle," Rozek says. "In Texas, sex offender treatment is a joke. They don't treat. They monitor. They intimidate."

When Rozek started volunteering at NARSOL, she was 65. Her first task: scouring the internet for articles on sex offenders and using the comment sections to post corrections. She also penned the occasional op-ed. Eventually she became NARSOL's communications director, writing for the website, spearheading the newsletter, and helping with committees and the conference. She spends up to eight hours a day on the work, all unpaid.

As a Christian, Rozek "just cannot accept that people cannot be forgiven." If a sex offender has "served his time, and if he's trying his best to be a decent human being now and wants to be a law-abiding citizen," Rozek says, "we need to not throw roadblocks in his path....If it was 30 years ago, and the person did everything required, has fulfilled every legal obligation, has been free and clear of any involvement with law enforcement for 30 years, has established a family, has been living with this family for years now, and then all of a sudden he cannot live with them anymore [because of residence restrictions], that is a horrible destruction to families."

Although most of the people on the registry are men, most of the people running the reform movement are women. Nobody really knows why, but there are a few theories.

"Women, in our culture, pull together the families," says Emily Horowitz, a professor of sociology at St. Francis College who is an expert on sex offender registries. "That's a lot of the reason why women fight so hard. I think men are somewhat hesitant to weigh in on something that's about sexual violence, because it could be viewed as like, 'Oh, you're

defending men who hurt women.'”

NARSOL, which was founded in 2007 and has branches in 19 states, is the oldest and largest sex offender law reform organization. It is joined by three other national groups, all led by women, most of whom have a friend, son, or husband on the registry. . . .

The national sex offender registry was created in 1994 by a law named after Jacob Wetterling, an 11-year-old Minnesota boy who was kidnapped and murdered in 1989. That law required states to create registries listing people convicted of sexually violent offenses or crimes against children. Unlike today’s databases, this registry was visible only to law enforcement agencies.

Two years later, the law was expanded after 7-year-old Megan Kanka was brutally murdered by a sex offender in New Jersey. Megan’s Law, passed in 1996, made registries accessible to the general public as part of a community notification mandate. In the 2003 case *Smith v. Doe*, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld sex offender registration, deeming it a form of civil regulation rather than criminal punishment.

That decision encouraged the expansion and proliferation of laws targeting sex offenders. “I call them sex offense registration laws on steroids,” says Southwestern University law professor Catherine Carpenter. “We’re dealing with laws that have no bounds, because the Supreme Court said that they were civil regulations.” From 2003 to 2012, Carpenter says, the number of covered offenses increased “dramatically,” and so did the length of registration. Those changes, she notes, were accompanied by “egregious collateral consequences,” such as residence restrictions. . . .

“The registry wasn’t developed out of research,” Horowitz says. “It was developed out of emotion and fear, which is a recipe for disaster in public policy.”

Rozek and other leaders of the registry reform movement want the laws to be grounded in science. "It's the National Association for Rational Sexual Offense Laws," Rozek says, "and the key word is *rational*. Something that is rational is based on science, based on fact, based on evidence. The registry isn't, and certainly none of the laws coming out of the registry are based on any evidence or any science."

While Rozek became a reformer after her friend was convicted of a sex crime, it was a chance encounter that led Janice Bellucci to the movement. One day in 2011, Bellucci, a 67-year-old California attorney who spent most of her career in aerospace law, was talking to Frank Lindsay, a water treatment specialist who was fixing her home's reverse osmosis system, when he mentioned that he had written a book. "Quite frankly," she says, "reading his book changed my life."

Bellucci found out that in 1979 Lindsay had committed a sex crime against a child under the age of 14, a crime for which he spent a year in jail, nearly all of it on weekends, thanks to a work furlough program. More than three decades later, he had not reoffended, but he was still subject to legal restrictions and potentially deadly threats. "A stranger broke into his home and tried to murder him because he was on the Megan's Law website," Bellucci says. "He escaped from his own house after being hit a couple times with a hammer. I just couldn't believe that any group of people in our country today [was] being treated that way."

On a sabbatical from her work at a California nonprofit, Bellucci couldn't get the sex registry out of her mind. "This issue kept popping up, kind of like a jack-in-the-box," she says. "And finally I sat down with myself, and I said, 'Why did I go to law school?' It was the movie *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and the character Atticus Finch. I'm like, 'What would Atticus do?'" The answer seemed obvious to her.

Bellucci initially tried to interest the American Civil

Liberties Union of California in the issue. "They basically said [they couldn't help] because they're afraid that if they became known as sex offender attorneys, their funding would disappear, which I think is a very cowardly position," she says.

Bellucci's children were adults, she was unmarried, and she decided she could "do anything I want to do." So she founded the Alliance for Constitutional Sex Offender Laws (ACSOL). To this day, a needlepoint of "What Would Atticus Do?" sits on her desk, next to a Ruth Bader Ginsburg action figure.

Like many in the movement, Bellucci believes sex offender restrictions are unconstitutional. As a lawyer, she could do something about that, but she did not have a lot of resources. So she and the few early members of ACSOL decided to go after "low-hanging fruit": Halloween-related restrictions in California.

In Simi Valley, Bellucci learned, sex offenders were required to post signs on their front doors during Halloween, alerting neighbors that they were on the registry and warning trick-or-treaters to stay away. She sued the city, arguing that the requirement was a form of compelled speech prohibited by the First Amendment. She won.

The Halloween signs are a good example of sex offender policies that have no basis in fact. A 2009 analysis of 67,000 sex crimes against children committed by people other than their relatives, reported in the journal *Sexual Abuse*, found "no increased rate on or just before Halloween." The researchers concluded that "these findings raise questions about the wisdom of diverting law enforcement resources to attend to a problem that does not appear to exist."

Like Rozek, Bellucci wants the registry to be based on science and reason. But that's hard to accomplish, she says, because when people "hear the term *sex offenders*, they just panic.

They're thinking of the worst sexual assault that you can ever think of." It is therefore difficult for them "to absorb new information or to analyze the information that's in their brain."

To combat that emotional response, Bellucci assures people that "we believe all children should be safe. We're not here to unleash a bunch of sexual predators on the public." Her message, she says, is that "the registry gives people a false sense of security," because "they're looking in the wrong direction," given that "more than 90 percent of the perpetrators are not on the registry."

Bellucci is admired by other reformers because she didn't join the movement to defend her brother or father or child; she did it because she saw an injustice. "The fact that she doesn't have what we call 'skin in the game' [makes her] more amazing," says Vicki Henry, president of Women Against the Registry (WAR). In contrast, Henry, 71, became an activist because her son is on the registry for downloading and distributing child pornography. He was in the Marines when he was caught in 2007. A military psychologist tied his use of child pornography to sexual abuse by his father.

"I thought I was losing my mind," Henry says. "When I got my feet back under me a little bit, [I thought] there's got to be other people that have gone through this. I know I'm not the only one."

Henry found Daily Strength, an online support group that hosted a subgroup called Families of Registrants, and then found NARSOL. She joined Women Against the Registry, which was a part of NARSOL at the time, and became its president in 2011. Around that time, WAR broke off –it wanted to do more protesting than NARSOL was comfortable with. Now Henry says she volunteers about 12 hours a day, seven days a week.

"I was pretty much raised in church," says Henry, a Southern

Baptist. "My kids were raised in church. We were taught to help other people."

Registries are all about ostracism, Henry argues, and GPS monitors are a prime example. "We're not saying that people shouldn't be adjudicated," she says. "But once they've been adjudicated [and] paid their debt to society, let them live in peace with their families. Don't put so many barriers in front of them.

Henry is not the only registry reformer who joined the movement because her son was caught with child pornography. Rita, who did not want her last name to be used, had a similar experience. Eleven years ago, Rita was having dinner with her husband and 26-year-old son, who was acting strangely. "I knew there was something wrong," she says. "I just kept asking him and asking him, and then he finally said it."

Rita's son told her that a few weeks before, around 1 a.m., he had heard banging on his apartment door. When he opened the door, he was face to face with multiple FBI agents. "He didn't know what they were looking for," Rita says. They were serving a search warrant based on evidence that he had downloaded child pornography on a peer-to-peer network.

As he told his mother this story, "he was shaking," she says. "I almost passed out...I couldn't believe that you could go to prison for what you look at." She and her husband sat there stunned. Their son said he had seen a lawyer, and he was facing time in federal prison. He ended up serving a little more than six years.

"It was just extremely difficult to get through those days," Rita says. "I knew in my heart I had two choices: Do I lie down and die, or do I do something? And in my mind, something was better than nothing. We decided we would get involved, just to try and bring some reason to these laws."

Rita's husband searched online and discovered the organization

that eventually became NARSOL. In 2009, they traveled from the small New York town where they live to Boston for their first meeting. “It was life-changing for me to meet other people who understood the overwhelming shame and punishment that we were looking at,” Rita says. “And those people are still my dearest friends.”

A few years later, Rita founded Caution Click, an organization that focuses on the legal treatment of people arrested for viewing child pornography. She strives to raise awareness among teenagers and their families so they don’t become sex offenders by sexting or looking at something they’re not supposed to.

Of all the reform organizations, ACSOL probably has had the most legislative impact. Through lawsuits and warning letters, Bellucci and her volunteers have managed to eliminate nearly all of California’s local ordinances making certain places, such as parks and schools, off-limits to sex offenders. They have also filed 31 lawsuits challenging local ordinances that limit where offenders can live. Nearly all of them have been successful.

NARSOL, Rozek’s group, has filed successful lawsuits against sex offender restrictions in Maryland and North Carolina. It recently won a victory in Butts County, Georgia, where it sued Sheriff Gary Long for requiring sex offenders to place warning signs in their front yards during Halloween. “Warning!” the signs said. “No Trick or Treat at This Address.” Last October, a federal judge ruled that Long’s signs were unconstitutional, based on the same First Amendment argument that Bellucci had deployed in Simi Valley. NARSOL also filed an amicus brief in *Packingham v. North Carolina*, the 2017 case in which the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously overturned a state law barring sex offenders from social media.

WAR and Caution Click have fewer legislative goals and focus more on education, so their accomplishments are harder to

quantify. But all of the organizations are trying to change the way we talk about sex offenses. When you speak to enough reformers, you notice how they've subtly changed the language used in such conversations: ***Sex offender registry*** is shortened to ***the registry***; ***child pornography*** becomes ***illicit images*** or ***C.P.***; ***sex offenders*** are ***registrants***. Reformers want people to recognize that individuals on the registry encompass a wide range of offenses, many of which are nonviolent.

[***Read the full piece here at reason.com***](#)