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Task force drafts online harassment law

By Betsy Taylor
 ASSOCIATED PRESS
 01/08/2008

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (AP) -- Adults who use the Internet or other media to harass children could be charged with a felony if Missouri lawmakers agree with a proposal made today by a special state task force.

Gov. Matt Blunt's task force on Internet harassment met for the final time, putting the finishing touches on a plan that will be submitted to the governor. Committee members did not say when a final draft would be ready.

Blunt created the task force last month after news accounts about the case of Megan Meier, a 13-year-old suburban St. Louis girl who committed suicide after receiving cruel messages on her MySpace page. The task force includes public safety and mental health professionals, lawyers and legislators.

Harassment is already a misdemeanor in Missouri, but the proposed changes identify certain types of harassment that task force members believe should result in stiffer penalties.

"Initially, we started down a path of creating a crime of cyberharassment. Instead, we decided to broaden the harassment law to include any communication. That picks up technology now and picks up technology in the future," said task force chairman Mark James.

Task force members identified aggravating factors that would make certain harassment cases a felony, like if anyone 21 or older harasses those 17 and younger. Those found guilty could get up to four years in prison and a \$5,000 fine.

Task force members also proposed a requirement that schools must report instances of stalking or harassment -- including cyberharassment -- to law enforcement if the incident happened on school property or while involved in a school activity.

James, who heads the state's Department of Public Safety, said the task force wants the law to focus on the person engaged in criminal conduct. The law would not hold businesses that provide Internet service or social networking Web sites like MySpace responsible.

Megan's suicide occurred in October 2006 but drew international attention late last year after news accounts. The teen thought she was communicating online with a teenage boy, "Josh." He turned out to be a fictional character in a hoax by a neighborhood mother, Lori Drew, and two girls.

Prosecutors declined to charge anyone in the case, in part because no specific laws appeared to apply. But some communities, including Megan's St. Charles County hometown of Dardenne Prairie, have adopted, or are considering adopting, laws to go after those involved in Internet bullying.

Drew's attorney, Jim Briscoe, has said the girls, who have been identified as Drew's juvenile daughter and a temporary employee of Drew, designed the fictional boy's account and sent the messages to Megan. Drew wasn't aware of the hurtful messages sent just prior to Megan's suicide, he has said. Other Internet users also joined in with cruel taunts before her death.

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- Anheuser-Busch's new cookbook is pairing food and beer
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- SLU will increase tuition next year by 6.5 percent
- GOP wants to raise some teacher salaries
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