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EDITORIAL

Quick action needed to stop sex offenders

Megan Kanka. Samantha Runnion. Jessica Lunsford. All three belong to a grim sorority of little girls whose promising young lives were snuffed out by repeat sex offenders.

Now, there is the terrifying story of Shasta Groene, the 8-year-old Idaho girl who was kidnapped, along with her brother Dylan, 9, by a convicted sex offender on the run from a child molestation charge.

Joseph Duncan, 42, from North Dakota, a perfect stranger, is accused of bludgeoning Shasta's mother, older brother and the mother's boyfriend to death with a hammer so he could abduct and molest the children.

Shasta, thankfully, was rescued last week when an alert waitress at a Denny's restaurant recognized her from a police photograph and contacted authorities. Her older brother, however, is feared dead.

Every time we turn around, it seems, there is another case of a psychotic pedophile with a sex crimes rap sheet a mile long, snatching someone's child. We are outraged that it keeps happening over and over again.

Yet, as a society, we avert our eyes and do nothing as though refusing to acknowledge the evil that lurks among us will make it disappear.

Children in the U.S. are being abducted, tortured and sexually assaulted in alarming numbers. More than 58,000 are kidnapped every year. Half of these are abused before they are found.

It is a national crisis that is a much more immediate threat to our way of life than any Middle Eastern terrorist group. It will take a national movement, both from our elected officials and our communities, to protect the public from sexually violent predators.

There are several bills currently before the Congress that seek to address the problem on the legal front.

The Dru Sjodin National Sex Offender Public Database Act -- named after a 22-year-old North Dakota woman murdered by a convicted rapist six months after he got out of prison -- would create a national sex offender registry. The Web site -- accessible to the public -- would post information about sex offenders in one central location.

Many states maintain their own registries, but they aren't much good if the sex offender was convicted of a crime in another state.

The law would also require more intensive monitoring of sex offenders once they are released from prison.

Another proposed bill would require sex offenders to register with the authorities prior to their release from prison, rather than after. They would also have to show up in person more often to re-register. Failure to comply would be a felony, meaning a return trip to jail.

First-time offenders would be required to wear a tracking device for the duration of their supervised release, second-time offenders would wear the devices for life.

Some complain that the laws unfairly stigmatize those who have paid their debt to society. However, sex offenders have much higher recidivism rates than the perpetrators of other crimes. Because of that, we do need to treat them differently.

There are more than a half-million sex offenders in the United States who are supposed to be registered. The authorities have no idea where more than 100,000 of them are.

Congress should move quickly to pass the tougher laws before another Joseph Duncan slips through the cracks.

Source: <http://www.contracostatimes.com/mld/cctimes/news/editorial/12104653.htm>