

Vt. mulls ban on aliases online for sex offenders

February 12 2011, By DAVE GRAM , Associated Press



A Facebook page is seen on a computer on Friday, Feb. 11, 2011 in Montpelier, Vt. Vermont lawmakers are considering a bill that would make it a crime for convicted sex offenders to use fake names on social networking sites like Facebook. (AP Photo/Toby Talbot)

(AP) -- Vermont lawmakers are considering making it a crime for convicted sex offenders to use false names on social media sites like Facebook, after one such incident was reported in the state.

Only two states have related measures, said Erik Fitzpatrick, a lawyer on

the research staff for the Vermont Legislature: New York and Illinois bar convicted [sex offenders](#) from using [social networking sites](#) at all as a condition of their probation. The National Conference of State Legislatures was unaware of similar laws or pending legislating in other states.

A former teacher at a school for boys who had committed sex crimes told a state Senate committee Friday that he spotted a Facebook profile last fall with a picture of a former student in the program who was using an alias.

Chuck Laramie, the former teacher, said the 26-year-old man had become Facebook friends with 14- and 15-year-old girls.

The man was convicted in 2004 of sexual assault, defined in Vermont law as engaging in a sex act with another person without that person's consent, and has not completed a sex offender treatment program, the state's online sex offender registry shows.

Laramie said he saw Facebook messages the man sent the girls, telling them he was "struggling with his sexuality and thinking he might be gay. Some of the girls were replying by saying, 'Oh, no, you're not.' He was getting these young girls to feel sympathy for him," Laramie said. "It was a classic grooming situation" in which sexual predators psychologically manipulate potential victims.

If the man were a sex offender trying not to re-offend, that was "an extremely high-risk situation to put yourself in," Laramie said.

Facebook takes extensive steps, including teams of internal investigators working with law enforcement agents around the country, when it detects people on its network behaving suspiciously, the company said in a statement. Contacting minors or users of predominantly one gender are

seen as clues, and Facebook uses systems including a national database of convicted sex offenders to do real-time checks, the statement said.

"Protecting our users, especially the many children who use [Facebook](#), has always been a top priority for us. We've devoted significant resources to developing innovative and complex systems to proactively monitor the site and its users," the company said.

Some state senators questioned whether Vermont could ban sex offenders from using computers altogether, but one, Sen. Jeanette White, a Windham Democrat, noted that many public services, such as applying for extended unemployment benefits, require using computers.

The bill under review would make the crime a misdemeanor punishable by up to two years in jail. The committee said it would continue to consider the bill.

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Citation: Vt. mulls ban on aliases online for sex offenders (2011, February 12) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-02-vt-mulls-aliases-online-sex.html>

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