



Posted on Sun, Aug. 01, 2010

## Restriction on sex offenders makes us less safe

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The problem of sex offenders who lived in a shantytown under the Julia Tuttle bridge in Miami-Dade County -- before getting housing that most now are about to lose -- demands resolution.

Contrary to Homeless Trust Chairman Ron Book's claim that there is no answer to this problem, there is a simple step that the County Commission can take -- without spending a penny of taxpayer dollars: Rescind its 2,500-foot sex-offender residency restriction, and let the state's 1,000-foot restriction govern where released offenders sleep.

More than a year ago, when the shantytown under the Julia Tuttle bridge brought Miami worldwide negative attention, state Department of Corrections Secretary Walter A. McNeil wrote to the Homeless Trust stating: "[U]sing the 1,000-foot criteria, most of the sex offenders living under the Julia Tuttle Causeway would be able to find a place to live in accordance with state law."

The area covered by the county's 2,500-foot restriction is more than five times greater than the state's exclusionary zone. By overrunning the boundaries set by the state, the county has created homelessness for released offenders who require stability and monitoring. Lack of social support and unemployment are the major factors in recidivism.

If the county followed the state's 1,000-foot restriction, most offenders could find a place to live because more low-cost housing would be available. Those who are unemployed and cannot pay rent could move in with family or friends. They would then get government IDs with real addresses, removing a major barrier to employment.

A year ago, the ACLU urged commissioners to rescind the 2,500-foot restriction so that state law could set the limits. Instead, commissioners acquiesced to the temporary, costly Band-Aid backed by the Homeless Trust. Now Book, who was responsible for creating the problem in the first place by lobbying to create the 2,500-foot restriction, has announced that the Trust will no longer provide housing for these people, turning them out onto the street once again.

Certainly, allowing the state's 1,000-foot restriction to operate is a far better alternative than creating a new shantytown under a bridge, the clustering of sex offenders in a few neighborhoods or having sex offenders sleep on the streets.

It is time for commissioners, who have the power and responsibility, to remedy this problem.

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