

To: Senator Greenleaf, Chairman of the PA Senate Judiciary Committee

My name is Lydia Laythe. I am a trauma therapist from Meadville, Pennsylvania who works primarily with men convicted of sexual offenses. Today you are going to hear about House Bill 1952, which proposes to reinstate SORNA for those men convicted of sexual offenses who would be off Megan's Law according to their original sentence. The bill passed unanimously in the House, because the representatives thought it was a no-brainer. But I'm writing to plead with you to treat this more thoughtfully than they did in the House.

If you support HB 1952, you will have a profound impact on the livelihoods of my clients, on their mental health, on their ability to support their families, and on their family and friends. Moreover, you will be pushing through legislation that is grossly misinformed, perpetuates harmful myths about "sex offenders" that neither helps my clients nor helps keep the community safe.

It seems that supervision policy is influenced by three mainstream myths about sex offenders: 1) Sex offenders are strangers lurking in the bushes, 2) Sex offenders are at extremely high risk to reoffend, and 3) Having sex offenders register and notify their neighborhood keeps the offender's risk low and communities safe. All three of these myths are inaccurate and actually serve to marginalize sex offenders even more than they already are, potentially putting them at greater risk.

First of all, research has shown that, on average, known offenders (family, friends, and acquaintances) commit the majority of sexual offenses.¹ Second of all, while policy makers and the general public tend to believe that every sex offender is always waiting for a chance to reoffend – the data doesn't support that either. Even social workers fall prey to exaggerated depictions of sex offenders. 78.2% of social work students believe that more than 50% of male offenders reoffend.² Sex offenders actually have relatively low levels of recidivism, and research has shown that they are no more dangerous and no more likely to reoffend than any other criminal population.³ A study conducted by the federal government found that 92.5% of offenders did not reoffend three years after their first offense. An analysis of Canadian sex offenders in 2004 found that 73% of sex offenders were not charged with or convicted of another sex offense even 15 years after their first offense. Lastly, research has yet to show that registration or community notification laws have any impact on lowering recidivism rates. Furthermore, despite strong public support, there is little to no research proving residential restriction laws' effectiveness in preventing child victimization, in lowering recidivism risk nor in increasing the safety of the community.⁴

Public shaming, residential restrictions, mandatory registry and neighborhood notification all claim to attempt to improve community safety and lower recidivism risk, but all these policies and practices only make it more difficult for sex offenders to exist in their communities. And the humiliation and marginalization these men feel does not decrease their risk of reoffending. If these men feel as if they have nothing to live for, then they have nothing to lose. And if they have nothing to lose, then what will prevent them from reoffending?

¹ Mancini. Sex crime, offenders, and society. 2014. 99

² Bernal & Meza, 2015

³ Mancini. Sex crime, offenders, and society. 2014. 104

⁴ Zilney, Lisa Anne and Laura J. Zilney. Reconsidering sex crimes and offenders: Prosecution or persecution? 2009.

Other practitioners in the field have suggested that the most effective way to reduce risk and increase safety would be to improve treatment and reintegration efforts for these men. And that's true. Studies have shown that sex offenders that complete treatment are far less likely to reoffend than offenders who receive no treatment at all.⁵

But if we keep dehumanizing, devaluing and ignoring them as a population in need of help, then we're the ones perpetuating this cycle of offense. We're the ones putting these men at higher risk for re-offense by ostracizing them and isolating them. We're the ones who dropped the ball. We're the ones who have the knowledge, power and responsibility to create change – to see a vulnerable population and help empower them to become positive influences in their community.

If you want to increase community safety and decrease recidivism risk, this is NOT the way to do it. I work with men convicted of sexual offenses. I know their red flags, triggers, and risk factors. If you truly believe that lifetime registry is the answer for all these men, then you are wildly misinformed about the research and reality of the men I work with and ought not be voting on such a bill to begin with.

Educate yourself before you make a knee-jerk reaction to this bill. Please. I urge you to listen to the professionals that work with these men, that know these men far better than you do. I urge you to read the research. I've forwarded countless articles to you and your fellow committee members. I urge you to be an educated voter. If you truly serve the people of this state, you will make the most-informed decision you could. You owe it to the people you represent.

Oppose HB 1952. Support the Supreme Court decision in the *Commonwealth v. Muniz* case. Draft a better bill that is informed by professional opinion, evidence-based practice, and research.

Sincerely,

Lydia Laythe

⁵ Mancini. Sex crime, offenders, and society. 2014. 114