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California parole agency breaks up sex-offender encampment in Anaheim

On Wednesday, officials with the Parole Department relocated 30 to 40 paroled offenders who had been living in cars and RVs outside its office on Coronado Street, police say.

By Christopher Goffard, Los Angeles Times

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The beat-up station wagons and peeling RVs had been turning up outside the Coronado Street parole office in Anaheim for months, parked through the night. But in recent weeks it seemed they filled the whole block. In Orange County, where more than a third of the paroled sex offenders are homeless, police estimated that 30 or 40 had taken to camping on the streets in this industrial stretch.

The situation appeared to stem from Jessica's Law, the 2006 statute that forbids sex offenders from living within 2,000 feet of schools, parks or other places where children gather, severely limiting lodging options in densely populated cities. "These people have difficulty finding residence, so they make do," said Anaheim police Lt. Julian Harvey.

The sex offenders are required to meet regularly with their parole officers, and those without a power source use the office to charge up the electronic ankle bracelets that monitor their whereabouts.

After media inquiries and business complaints, however, the state Parole Department cleared the block Wednesday night, moving the sex offenders to another location. Anaheim police Sgt. Tim Schmidt said the parole agency did not inform the Anaheim police where the offenders had been relocated.

"We had no clue they were doing that," Schmidt said Thursday. "Somebody made a quick, abrupt decision that we didn't know anything about." The Parole Department did not return calls seeking comment.

On Wednesday afternoon, hours before the streets were cleared, a convicted 41-year-old child molester was sitting near the parole office in his vehicle, his belongings filling the back seat. He said he lost his lodging nearby after a Boys & Girls Club moved in down the block, putting him in violation of Jessica's Law. After four years in prison, he said he has been living in his vehicle for months and that nobody has hassled him.

The California Department of Corrections, which runs the Parole Department, "has been very good to us," he said. "They know we can't go anywhere." He said the sex offenders who camped

there did not associate with each other because the law forbade it. He said he felt a measure of protection living near the parole office.

"All of us are safer than in the streets," he said. Still, he did not want to be identified for fear of retaliation. He said he had heard a rumor that there might be a drive-by shooting targeting the campers.

According to the Parole Department, California has about 8,580 registered sex offenders on parole, about 2,000 of whom are classified as transient. Of Orange County's 302 registered sex offenders on parole, 119 are transient, and in Los Angeles County, the homeless represent 421 of 1,896 offenders.

"The bottom line is, they're going to be in the city some place," Kenneth Ford, the Parole Department's chief deputy regional administrator, said in an interview earlier this week. "We're trying to make them be compliant with the law. You're not going to find a lot of compliant housing for them."

Ford said the Parole Department had reached an understanding with the Anaheim Police Department that there were advantages to having the parolees at a specific location.

"If they were going to be transient, they wanted them to be transient in an area where they know they are," Ford said. "My understanding now is the area is not acceptable to the chief of police."

The Police Department insists it never had such an understanding with the parole agency. "We do not have any formal or informal agreement," Schmidt said. He added that although camping on a city street violates an Anaheim ordinance, police had refrained from citing the sex offenders in hope that a solution could be reached with the Parole Department.

Jerry Grinstead, who co-owns an emergency-vehicle business near the parole office, has watched warily as the overnight campers proliferated in recent weeks.

When a television news report identified the transients as sex offenders last week, however, his worries grew, especially because his granddaughter and daughter-in-law sometimes visit his office. On Monday, he said, he met with Anaheim police Chief John Welter and Mayor Pro-Tem Harry Sidhu to express his concerns.

Though the sex offenders have been dispersed, the company's co-owner, Travis Grinstead, said that he has seen some of them camped on the surrounding blocks in their vehicles.

The sex offenders are a shunned and hated fraction of the traffic at the parole office. On Wednesday afternoon, milling around the street in front of the office, a group of thickly tattooed ex-convicts were taking a break from mandatory drug rehabilitation class. They said they did not know where the sex offenders were, but it was best for them to keep out of sight.

"This is probably the safest block they could be on," said Richard Velasquez, 33, of Anaheim. But he added: "Don't get me wrong. If I find out there's one, I'm punching him in the face."