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San Diego assemblyman proposes tougher penalties for sex crimes

At emotional press conference attended by the parents of slain 17-year-old Chelsea King, Republican Nathan Fletcher calls for longer sentences for those convicted of sexual assaults against minors.

By Patrick McGreevy

April 13, 2010

Reporting from Sacramento

People convicted of sex crimes against minors would face longer prison sentences and more time on parole under a proposal made Monday in response to the slaying of 17-year-old Chelsea King in San Diego County.

The man charged with killing the Poway High School student had been on parole until 2008, after serving five years in prison for molesting a 13-year-old girl.

"These offenders cannot be rehabilitated," said Brent King, Chelsea's father, at an emotional Capitol news conference.

"They do not deserve a second chance," he said.

King and his wife, Kelly, joined Assemblyman Nathan Fletcher (R-San Diego) as the legislator announced his proposed changes to state laws that govern sex offenses.

Fletcher wants to establish a penalty of a life sentence without the possibility of parole for forcible sex crimes against those younger than 18 when there are aggravating circumstances such as torture and "kidnapping that substantially increases risk of harm to the victim."

Absent such circumstances, parole would be increased from five years to 10.

He also wants to increase the penalty from a minimum 15 years of incarceration to at least 25 years for a forcible sex crime against a minor that includes any one of several "minor" circumstances including use of a weapon, simple kidnapping or drugging of the victim.

Those convicted of sex crimes against a child younger than 14 would face lifetime parole with electronic monitoring of their location.

And Fletcher proposed that registered sex offenders be barred from visiting parks where children

regularly gather without approval from a parole agent.

"Our children deserve nothing less than absolute protection from violent sex offenders," Fletcher said.

His proposals, to be contained in Assembly Bill 1844, face a tough road in the Legislature.

Many bills to increase criminal penalties have bogged down amid concern by Democrats that they would expand the prison population when the state is under a court order to reduce overcrowding.

In addition, the state's attempt to carry out voter-approved requirements for electronic monitoring of sex offenders has been plagued by confusion. The law does not detail who is responsible for tracking or how to pay for it.

However, Fletcher's proposal has backing from some Democratic lawmakers, including Assembly members Marty Block of San Diego and Mary Salas of Chula Vista.

And lawmakers will face pressure to act from Brent and Kelly King.

Chelsea's mother's voice broke with emotion as she described the "incomparable nightmare" the family is going through.

"We must demand nothing short of swift and decisive action for all of our children," she said.

John Albert Gardner III is accused of murdering Chelsea. He is also charged with assault in a December 2009 attack on a 22-year-old woman in the park where Chelsea's body was found in March.