

MySpace to give up sex-offender data

By JILL BODACH, Hour Staff Writer
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REGION — Sex offenders seeking anonymity on the Internet may soon have a more difficult time hiding behind screen names.

On Monday, MySpace agreed to comply with the written request of Attorney General Blumenthal and several other attorneys general to provide the names and addresses of the thousands of convicted sex offenders with profiles on the site. Blumenthal made the request as co-chair of the eight-member executive committee of attorneys general that represents all 50 states.

MySpace was also asked to release the number of sex offenders it has identified, how many profiles have been removed and how the site plans to alert law enforcement and other users who communicated with the offenders.

The identification of the sex offenders came as a result of MySpace's December 2006 hiring of Sentinel Tech Holdings to check the site for registered sex offenders.

According to Blumenthal, the number of sex offenders who frequent the 160 million user MySpace is staggering.

"There are at least 5,000 registered convicted sex offenders with MySpace profiles posing an immediate, urgent risk to children —potentially violating their parole and probation, and requiring more vigilant measures," Blumenthal said.

This does not, Blumenthal says, account for unconvicted predators or profiles of convicted offenders using aliases.

"MySpace has decided to do the right thing, but additional steps are necessary, such as age verification, to protect children from predators on social networking sites," Blumenthal said.

Detective Michael Murray of the Norwalk Police Department said he hopes the MySpace decision doesn't cause a false sense of security.

"MySpace giving up the sex offenders it knows of is good, but it's not going to solve all of the problems of Internet solicitations," Murray said. "Most of the people who solicit children on the Internet do not have prior convictions where they have had to register for a sex offenders list, or, even if they do have a prior conviction they haven't registered like they were supposed to. Nothing takes the place of good parenting."

Marsha Darmory, director of the Children's Connection, a program of the Human Services Council, works with the police department to teach parents and children about Internet safety.

"It's surprising to see after all the years we've been talking about Internet safety and how vulnerable children are on the Internet that there is still an enormous amount of children who do give up their information to total strangers and whose parents don't know about it," Darmory said. "We still have a long way to go."

Darmory hopes to host a series of Internet Safety workshops for children and parents during the summer.

"The summer can be a dangerous time because kids have more free time to spend online," Darmory.

A San Diego-based company, PC Pandora, has created a device to help parents monitor their child's Internet usage.

"Many, many people are presenting a lot of scary information to parents and warning them to protect their children, but no one is telling them how to do that," Ken Shallcross, director of media and public relations for PC Pandora, said.

Shallcross describes PC Pandora as TiVo for the computer. Unlike other software, PC Pandora actually allows parents to see — in real time — what their children are doing online.

"Not only does it record keystrokes and Web sites, it provides a screen capture so parents can see everything a kid is doing online," Shallcross said.

Shallcross said he knows there will be people who say this is a violation of a child's privacy but that the device was designed as a safety precaution.

"It can be used as an ultimate line of defense so that if someone solicits a child online, their parents will have a record of it," Shallcross said. "It can also be used by parents who fear that their child wouldn't tell them if someone was solicited online."

The software also includes talking points for parents to talk to their kids about online safety. The downloadable software is available at www.pcpandora.com.

Meanwhile, Blumenthal hopes that MySpace will release its information promptly so his investigation can continue.

"Our subpoena compels this information right away — within hours, not weeks — without delay because it is vital to protecting children," Blumenthal said.