



Middleburg Heights recreation center will bar visitors on sex offender list

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photoMiddleburg Heights Recreation and Community Center.

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MIDDLEBURG HEIGHTS, Ohio -- The city, which already blocks residents who are sex offenders from using its **community center**, intends to do the same with visitors who want to use the building.

Starting March 1, center workers will run the driver's licenses of prospective guests through the National Sex Offender List. If the people are on the list, they won't get in.

Middleburg Heights Recreation Director Carl Guarnieri said there has not been a problem at the center, but officials grew concerned about guests brought in by members.

"We allow members to bring in four guests each," said Guarnieri. "We began to notice that a lot of the people in the center were guests we did not know. We get 1,200 people a day in here. What better place for a sex offender to go than a pool with a shower room and a locker room?"

"Frankly, we should have done this five years ago," he said. "We sometimes have strangers gathering outside asking people to sign them in as guests so they can play basketball. We had to get a handle on this."

The recreation complex has an indoor and outdoor pool, indoor track and gym along with locker rooms and many areas and rooms that can be used for other activities.

Middleburg Heights is not the only city in the area that checks recreation center users with the sex offender list. An official with the ACLU said the list provides a "false sense of security."

Chris Link, executive director of the ACLU of Ohio, said not every sexual offender is on the list, and "it makes no distinction between the college kid who pees off the front porch and a rapist murderer. Some authorities are becoming punitive, threatening people with a charge that would put them on the list."

Link, whose office is in Cleveland, suggested children need to be taught what to watch out for.

"Most sexual offenses are not committed by strangers but by family members or people you know. The centers would be better off warning young people about danger signs."

Middleburg Heights Mayor Gary Starr said the ACLU will not have to face parents if the unthinkable happened.

"I want parents to know that we are doing everything possible to keep their children safe when they are dropped off," Starr said. "We want no margin of error when it comes to keeping children safe. We have never had an incident here, and we want to keep it that way."

The names of Middleburg Heights residents and people from other communities who buy memberships to the recreation center are checked through the Cuyahoga County Sheriff's Office, which provides an updated list of convicted sexual offenders.

Debbie Ezaki, a young mother from Parma Heights who brings her disabled son to the center for exercise, said since members are screened, guests should be as well.

"There are families who drop children off here, and they need to be protected," she said.

Ron Booms, 69, of Cleveland, agreed.

"I've heard some people in here say weird things about rubbing up on girls," he said. "That makes me think they should check."

Kristin Minchak, 37, of Parma Heights, said she thought the idea was an overreaction.

"There are people on sex offenders' lists who are rapists and some who did something little. This lumps them together. That doesn't seem fair," she said.

Centers in Medina and Macedonia make sex offender checks before allowing people to sign up for memberships.

"We instituted a policy in 2003," said Christy Moats, assistant finance director of the Medina center. "If they are on it, they are denied access. We have come across several people this way. They did not protest and left when asked."

