

October 3, 2006

STENEHJEM TARGETS INTERNET PREDATORS – ANNOUNCES INTERNET LURING UNIT

At news conferences today in Grand Forks and Bismarck, Attorney General Wayne Stenehjem announced the formation of North Dakota's Internet Luring Unit. The multi-jurisdictional unit will coordinate statewide efforts to identify, apprehend and prosecute sexual predators who use the Internet to lure their victims.

"Children often form Internet friendships quickly, and even Internet-savvy teenagers will drop their guard when they think they are chatting with a friend. The Internet is a wonderful tool, but it is also an open door through which a sexual predator can easily enter," said Stenehjem.

According to a survey by the US Department of Justice, one in five children receive unwanted sexual solicitations online, and 75 percent of children say they would reveal personal information about themselves or their family in exchange for gifts.

Internet predators take advantage of the anonymity of chat rooms to create a persona that appears sympathetic to the child or teenager they have targeted. Once a pedophile has created a cyber relationship he then works to arrange a meeting in person. In an effort to evade law enforcement, the proposed meeting may be in a city or state away from the pedophile's home town.

The Bureau of Criminal Investigation is a member of "Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) program," which coordinates national enforcement efforts to combat online child sexual exploitation. BCI, which heads the Internet Luring Unit, received a \$50,000 grant from ICAC to purchase specialized equipment necessary to the enforcement efforts, and for computer forensic training. The BCI will conduct undercover operations targeting online predators, as well as assisting local agencies with forensic investigations.

Recently, several news shows have conducted "stings" in which pedophiles are confronted when they arrive at a particular location for what they believed was a pre-arranged sexual encounter with a child. These shows have made the public more aware of the scope of the problem.

"What those shows don't tell you is that often these sexual predators cannot be prosecuted because the evidence – the chat room logs – has not been properly preserved," said Stenehjem. "The Internet Luring Unit will utilize state-of-the-art technology to capture and preserve vital computer evidence necessary for successful prosecution."

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Recognizing that these types of Internet crimes almost always cross county or state lines, the state's Internet Luring Unit, which has members from federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies, will work together to ensure geographic boundaries do not get in the way of apprehending and prosecuting sexual predators for their crimes. The unit also will investigate and prosecute child pornography cases.

Stenehjem said two BCI agents will complete the specialized forensics training in the next few weeks, after which time the unit will be fully operational – and able to aid local law enforcement agencies in identifying, arresting, and prosecuting sexual predators.

“Propositioning a minor for purposes of a sexual act is a crime, whether it is done on the phone, over the Internet, or in person. Pedophiles should beware. They won't know whether they are chatting with a child or an undercover agent because we will be out there waiting for them,” Stenehjem warned.

As prevention and education work hand-in-hand with law enforcement, Stenehjem's office is joining with the Netsmartz organization to promote safe Internet surfing habits. “Our kids need to understand that all is not as it may seem on the Internet. The person they are sharing secrets with may, in fact, be a predator in disguise,” said Stenehjem. “This program helps parents to understand the dangers and gives kids the tools they need to surf the Internet safely.”

To report suspected Internet luring, call your local law enforcement agency, or the BCI Tip Line at 1-800-472-2185.

Internet Safety: Netsmartz: www.netsmartz.org and <http://www.cybertipline.com/>

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- Cybercrime Survey:
http://www.ncmec.org/en_US/documents/Internetsafety_surv.pdf