McKenna plans to take action to protect victims of state's most dangerous criminals

Local News

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OLYMPIA — When shocking crimes are committed by repeat offenders, members of the public often ask elected officials why they didn’t do more to keep those criminals off the streets.

“We know there are ticking time bombs out there, just waiting to go off,” said Washington State Attorney General Rob McKenna. “Local police and prosecutors know the identities of many of the worst repeat abusers. Today we’re asking the Legislature to allow the authorities to bring them to justice.”

The attorney general’s domestic violence bill was among those previewed at a press conference Monday. Just as the law gives extra penalties to serial car thieves and drug dealers, McKenna’s proposal clamps down on repeat domestic abusers. The legislation targets abusers who graduate to felony abuse, which often involves firearms or other deadly weapons.

“These abusers need to be dealt with like the chronic criminals that they are,” said Sen. Dale Brandland, R-Bellingham, a former Whatcom County sheriff. “Their sentences need to be tougher. Their victims need more time to heal and start a new life. A short stay in the county jail keeps their families in constant fear of the day the abuser is let out. We need to use what we have learned aboutthe escalating nature of violent offenders: The next time, their attack might be fatal. ***”***

AG McKenna’s domestic violence bill is sponsored in the House by Rep. Kirk Pearson, R-Monroe, and co-sponsored by the chairman of the House Law & Justice Committee, Rep. Christopher Hurst, D-Enumclaw, among others. A similar bill died in committee last year.

Protecting children from sexual exploitation and abuse

The attorney general also renewed his call to upgrade the state’s ability to combat the rape and molestation of children by pursuing abusers who video-record their crimes, and the underground market that trades in the resulting images.

“Our bill is an attack on an illegal industry that profits from reprehensible pictures and videos of children being sexually assaulted,” said Rep. Al O’Brien, D-Seattle, the House bill’s sponsor and a former police sergeant. “Scientific research shows that most child pornographers aspire to victimize actual children or have already done so.”

According to a 2005 study by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC), a sample of 1,713 child pornography arrests showed that 53 percent of those arrested were also charged with actual or attempted sexual abuse of children.

“This bill targets those whom the courts can demonstrate beyond a reasonable doubt have purposely and repeatedly accessed images of sex crimes committed against young children,” said Rep. Kirk Pearson, R-Monroe, who is co-sponsoring the House version of the bill. A study commissioned by the U.S. Congress and the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children shows that most of those arrested for possessing child pornography had images of children who had not yet reached puberty. In fact, 58 percent of those images were of children under 5, including infants.

AG McKenna’s bill redefines the felony crime of possession of depictions of child pornography to include deliberately viewing those images of child sexual abuse over the Internet. The bill has strong bipartisan support this year, including the Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Sen. Adam Kline, D-Seattle.

Protecting Vulnerable Adults

AG McKenna also asked legislators to streamline the state’s ability to protect a growing class of victims: seniors and the disabled.

“The Department of Social and Health Services is flooded with reports of financial and physical abuse of seniors,” said Rep. Jim Moeller, D-Vancouver. “Now, with our constituents struggling to hold on to what’s left of their nest eggs, it’s more important than ever for us to act.”

Rep. Moeller has prime-sponsored the House bill, which provides longer sentences for those who commit crimes against vulnerable adults and formally authorizes financial institutions to freeze a transaction for up to three business days if financial exploitation is suspected. The bill has more than a dozen sponsors in the House and Senate.

Consumer Protection and Government Accountability

AG McKenna announced this year’s government accountability and consumer protection bills, including:

· The creation of an independent office to enforce the Public Records and Open Meetings Acts. The bill is jointly requested by the State Auditor and Attorney General’s Offices. “Everyday folks need to have access to government records,” said House Majority Leader Rep. Lynn Kessler, D-Hoquiam. “But if you’re denied access to the records you requested, you should have somewhere to go besides court.”

· A fix to the state’s Lemon Law that extends “lemon” disclosures to used-car dealers. “The Lemon Law is a pilot for the rest of the nation; they look to us. We’ve been improving it a little bit at a time for years now,” said House sponsor Rep. Alex Wood, D-Spokane. “If a used car you’re looking at has been judged to be a lemon earlier in its life you shall be notified. … Everyone seems to agree that the basic premise of notification is a good thing. Hopefully, we can get that done this year.”

· A cap on “found money” fees to protect foreclosed homeowners from scammers

who offer to recover remaining sales proceeds for a healthy fee. “If you’re losing your home to foreclosure, you’re already getting hit with a devastating blow,” said the House bill’s prime sponsor, Rep. Dean Takko, D-Longview. “Our bill caps the finder’s fee at 5 percent, the same amount allowed for other kinds of unclaimed funds.”

The Legislative session begins on Monday, Jan. 11.