

Walker seeks to expand Internet Crimes Against Children division

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Gov. Scott Walker is pushing for an additional \$1 million during the next two years to crack down on Internet predators who prey on children, even as he is demanding cuts and staff reductions in other areas.

Walker's budget proposal would add 11 new positions, including investigators and computer analysts, to the Department of Justice's Internet Crimes Against Children unit, increasing the staff by 50 percent. The unit's budget for 2011 without the proposed funding is about \$2.4 million.

In the wake of Walker's proposed \$96 million cut to shared revenue that municipalities and counties rely on to pay for police protection, Wausau Police Chief Jeff Hardel said the funding for Internet predators is important.

"Everything is a balancing act, but when you're talking about the children in our communities and nation, it's pretty vital to protect them," Hardel said.

ICAC, which includes the work of officers from 164 affiliated police agencies across the state, investigated 480 cases in 2010, more than double the 233 cases investigated in 2008, said Jenniffer Price, who oversees the unit.

Protecting children has been a priority for Attorney General J.B. Van Hollen, who requested the extra money and staff.

"We can only speculate the number of cases in a given year are going to increase," Price said. "The more investigators we have to investigate, the more cases will be worked."

ICAC agents are specially trained to investigate child pornography and reports of people who solicit children on the Internet for sex. ICAC attempts to be proactive by working undercover to catch Internet predators in the act, but often investigates information uncovered by local police departments, Price said.

The Wausau and Merrill police departments, which are members of ICAC, also have officers who have advanced computer forensic training. The two

departments investigate many of their own crimes, but sometimes, the cases are more complex than they can handle.

Hardel said state agents recently took over the investigation of a Wausau man who was found to have more than 1,000 images of possible child pornography on DVDs and computers. Police found the images in October while searching the home of 38-year-old Clyde McCollum while investigating a report of a child who was allegedly sexually assaulted.

The Marathon County district attorney's office filed 75 felony counts of possession of child pornography against McCollum after ICAC investigators found at least 75 images of child pornography.

McCollum, who is not charged with sexual assault, is scheduled for a plea hearing May 3.

Had ICAC not taken over McCollum's case, three detectives would have to work the case solely for four months to review all of the images found, Hardel said.

Price said ICAC's biggest challenge is keeping up with constantly changing computer technology that Internet predators use to hide their illicit activity. People searching for child pornography meet on websites and chat rooms where they can share or download files with the images. The predators often have complex software programs that can hide child pornography on hard drives and servers that can store a vast number of files.

Agents can spend hours searching for child pornography images and the department lacks server space to store predator's computer files for analysis, Price said.

"I wonder if a million dollars is enough with the advancement of technology and the skills the offenders are developing," Merrill Police Chief Ned Seubert said.

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