

After protests, 'Dr. Phil,' sex offenders move out

ANAHEIM – The last of 11 registered sex offenders whose presence in a quiet Anaheim neighborhood led to community protests, discussions with a state senator and a debate on national television have moved out.

Six residents of a group home for sex offenders operated by a Buena Park church began moving out of the home on the 1700 block of Rutherford Street earlier this week, neighborhood residents said.

Word of the move spread quickly throughout the community, where neighbors – many of whom said they feared for their children's safety – rejoiced.

"This all comes down to children's safety, and we are thrilled to have them out," said Linda Liptrap-Gutierrez, a leader in the effort to shut down the group homes.

Back in April, the community members banded together after learning that two homes in the community housed a total of 11 sex offenders – the six on Rutherford and five more on Meadowlark Lane.

Within weeks, the five sex offenders on Meadowlark were moved out because the homeowner wanted to sell the house.

But Betsy Mata, who oversees the sex-offender rehabilitation program on behalf of Holy Ground Christian Fellowship of Buena Park, vowed to keep operating in the home on Rutherford.

Mata did not immediately return a message left on her cell phone asking for the reason of the most recent move and where the residents are going.

Neighbors continued to protest in recent months and pushed for meetings with local and state politicians to find what they said would be more appropriate housing for recovering sex offenders.

Sen. Lou Correa, D-Santa Ana, held a community meeting to explore potential changes to state laws. And Orange County people on both sides of the issue appeared on a "Dr. Phil" TV episode to debate the issue of housing for sex offenders.

Mata's husband and church pastor, Jose, reached by phone Thursday, deferred comment to his wife. He has said neighbors should not feel unsafe – the sex offenders are closely monitored and committed to recovery.

"I believe these are men committed to turning their lives around through Christ," Mata said when the controversy sparked in April. "Some people will tell you the only way they will change is with a bullet through their head. We don't believe that. They made mistakes. And with love and compassion, they can change."

Still, Liptrap-Gutierrez, one of a handful of community leaders who has kept up the pressure, said her neighborhood is feeling great relief with the sex offenders gone.

"The four moms who were most involved (in pushing out the sex offenders) are hiring a limousine and going out to a nice dinner in Brea to celebrate," she said.

Liptrap-Gutierrez said she wants to continue working with politicians to draft new laws that would regulate where paroled sex offenders can live.

In what she called an odd coincidence, on her way to work from Anaheim to Huntington Beach, she spotted the car of one of the sex offenders who used to live on Meadowlark.

After doing some research online, she found that some sex offenders are in a home on the 10900 block of Jean Street in unincorporated Anaheim – about 10 miles west of her neighborhood.

The Megan's Law registry lists three sex offenders living in a house on that street. It's unclear if the home is operated by the Holy Ground church.

"I went and knocked on doors in that neighborhood to let the neighbors know they'd moved there," Liptrap-Gutierrez said. "Without legislation, this problem will continue."