

Case: Sex Offender at the Recreation Complex

By Grant Neeley

Background

Paul Smith was only nineteen years old when he first pled guilty in July 1974 to abducting and raping three women in the area. He was sentenced to serve four to twenty-five years in prison, but in January 1975, after serving just five months, Smith was released on shock parole.

Just six days after Smith was placed on shock parole, he was charged with another 1974 rape. This rape took place six days before Smith pled guilty to the three initial charges. Even though this charge was later dropped, Smith was ordered back to prison three weeks after his initial release. He was once again placed on parole and released into society in August 1983. Prison officials noted that Smith had served a longer sentence than the average stay of a sex offender.

By November 1983, Smith was charged with grabbing a woman and trying to force her into her apartment. For this offense he was sentenced with eight to twenty-five years in prison. Unlike his first incarceration, this time Smith received counseling and help for his behavior.

The Case

In November 2009, Paul Smith started working out at the City Recreation Complex. The fact that Smith was a sex offender was only discovered because an employee was a former classmate of his. Upon learning about Smith's past, the recreation

center staff was informed that there was a sex offender working out at the facility.

Although his name was not initially released to protect his rights and privacy, staff were mindful to be more alert while on duty. They were instructed never to leave the building alone at night, and to create a more visible presence while the police looked further into the situation. Upon learning that there were no laws or policies in place to keep Smith from using the Recreation Complex, the staff was then informed of his name and shown his picture.

In December 2009, another one of Paul Smith's former classmates recognized him at the Recreation Complex. She was outraged that he was permitted to use the facility after the severity of the crimes he had committed. The woman was so concerned about the situation that she pleaded to the facility supervisor, the department director, the city manager, and the mayor to have Smith banned from the facility. The concerned patron was informed, to her astonishment, that Smith had every right to utilize the facility. Due to the woman's concern staff were informed to contact the police department every time Smith entered the building in order to reassure patrons that their safety was of the utmost importance.

Media Involvement

A local television news producer received an e-mail from a concerned patron of the Recreation Complex on Saturday, January 9, 2010. The informant was alarmed that city officials knew a convicted sex offender was using the Recreation Complex yet did nothing about it. The producer assigned the story to reporter Beth Simpson.

Simpson contacted Amy Brown, the City Communications Director, on the afternoon of Tuesday, January 12, 2010.

Questions

You are Amy Brown, City Communication Officer, and receive a call from the reporter Beth Simpson requesting an interview with a city official regarding the issue. Simpson also requests to shoot footage at the Recreation Complex and to interview patrons.

1. Who should handle the interview and why?
2. What questions or issues should you prepare the spokesperson for?
3. Do you allow her to shoot footage and interview patrons at the Recreation Complex?
4. Who are your audiences in considering your responses? What messages do you want them to take away from your responses?

City's Response

Even though the City Manager's Office already knew about the situation, they did anticipate media attention and there was no prepared statement. Brown needed some time to review what they already knew, meet with City Manager Greg Nance, and prepare the interview.

Brown found out Simpson's deadline and they agreed to meet two hours later. While there was no official press release to read from, there were three main objectives that Brown wanted to convey to the audience. First, she wanted to make sure that Nance was calm and collected with the message. Remaining calm would show that the situation was being handled and patrons had nothing to worry about. Second, the city wanted to let the audience know that law enforcement was involved. Brown stated that this was important so everyone knew the city was being advised on the situation and not just making closed decisions. It was also important to inform the audience that the city was taking Smith's rights into consideration along with the other Recreation Complex users'. The third and final message that the City Manager's Office wanted to get across was that everything was under control; the staff of the Recreation Complex was a competent group trained to handle such situations. It was also essential to state that police patrols had been increased. While the fact that a sex offender was utilizing a city facility may be new to the audience, the staff has been handling the situation internally for months.

Although much of what City Manager Greg Nance stated was not used in the broadcast, Brown assured everything was covered in one form or another. She stated that Simpson incorporated a lot of what was cut out from his statement in her coverage of the

story. While the information did not come solely from Nance, the message was communicated truthfully and thoroughly.

Even if the City is willing to work the media, there are still limitations on how far the City can go. A Recreation Complex supervisor walked around with Brown and her cameraman so they could obtain footage of the area, but they were not allowed to interview people outside of the building because it would interfere with their normal business.

Media Coverage

On Tuesday, January 12, 2010 a local television station aired that the Recreation Complex had a Tier III sex offender using its facility on their eleven o'clock news broadcast.

Simpson filmed just outside the doors of the facility. While officially on public property, she interviewed anyone leaving the complex who was willing to stop and talk. Simpson interviewed at least ten people, but only two people were willing to be interviewed on camera. Coincidentally, both people ended up being women who had no prior knowledge of Smith's history and were very understanding of the situation. One follow-up story aired the next day on the seven o'clock news focusing on how lawmakers are working on new legislation that deals with where sex offenders can go, including public buildings.

Outcomes

State legislators are looking into stricter laws to prevent sex offenders from being in public places. This story helps raise awareness for anyone who may want to support or fight against any new legislation. It also raised consciousness that sex offenders still have quite a bit of freedom on where they visit. While a person needs to live a normal life, one should still be aware of their surroundings.

Paul Smith apologized to the City Parks and Recreation Director for any inconvenience that he caused. He stated that he did not know he was causing so many problems by working out at the facility. Smith's pass was refunded and he no longer visits the Recreation Complex.

The City still refuses to put any policies into place to ban sex offenders from coming into the facility. The City understands and respects that offenders still have rights. It is also impossible to keep anyone from coming into the facility that has a criminal history. Unless someone is up front when joining the Recreation Complex, there is no way to know the person's legal history, as it is not appropriate or cost effective to run background checks on prospective members. The facility is a public place and anyone can utilize the amenities that are offered.