

Keeping a Close Watch

IPS, Office
of Spokesperson

Israel recently passed a law protecting the public from sex offenders. With the law's passage, a new unit has arisen in the Israel Prison Service: the Unit for Monitoring Sex Offenders. Today, someone is watching them – and protecting us.



A., a Jewish male, sexually molested his children from his first marriage and the children of his second wife. Like many other sex offenders, A. is aware of his behavior and his obsession but is unable to control his conduct. He has been convicted of incest and sent to prison, where he served his sentence in full. He recently completed his sentence and has been released.

“Here you have this person sitting in prison serving a 15-year sentence for grave sex offenses. He does not get any furloughs and his sentence is not shortened by one third because of good behavior; he is treated as a dangerous criminal. Then, one day, the door is opened and he is told, ‘You are free to go.’” This is how Brigadier Ronit Zer, commander of a totally new unit in the Israel Prison Service – the Unit for Monitoring Sex Offenders – describes the case of A. and others like him. “It is like releasing a tiger. It is simply frightening to think that such a person is released without any limitations.”

That is precisely the reason why the unit was created. A. was defined as a moderately to

highly dangerous criminal and it was recommended that he be placed under surveillance, because the feeling was that, immediately upon release from prison, he would start looking around for new victims. Inter alia, it was recommended that he not be permitted to be near children, whether in a work or volunteer context, that he not be permitted to have any contact whatsoever with his victims, that it be ascertained that he has no pornographic material in his possession and that he be intensively monitored.

Making Israel a safer place

It is somewhat bizarre to realize that, up until recently, Israeli law did not prescribe any orderly monitoring of sex offenders. “In Western countries, both in Europe and North America, legislation regarding the monitoring of sex offenders has been on the lawbooks for many years, whereas, in Israel, there was a huge vacuum,” explains Brigadier General Yossi Beck, head of the Israel Prison Service Treatment and Rehabilitation Authority.

“Six years ago, the Ministry of Justice began to formulate a law that would provide a comprehensive solution as far as the state’s attitude to sex offenders is concerned. The law went into effect in October.”

Brigadier General Beck has been closely associated with the new law, the Law for Protecting the Public from Sex Offenders, from its first day. “The intention was to create a comprehensive law, not to deal with a small specific area,” he points out. “A large interministerial team – representatives of the Israel Police, the Israel Prison Service, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Social Welfare, the Probation Service and the Public Defender’s Office – worked on the drafting of the complex law.”

The goal of the discussions was to create a new law that would provide solutions in three areas: a professional definition of those evaluating the dangerousness of sex offenders, a field in which there were no directives whatsoever; the establishment of orderly procedures for monitoring sex offenders; and the creation of a professional

treatment context for sex offenders in Israel.

When the law went into effect, the question was raised as to who should monitor sex offenders: Should the job be given to an existing agency or should a new authority be established under the auspices of this law? As in many other instances, the agency that displayed the necessary initiative and volunteered was the Israel Prison Service. “The IPS commissioner decided that the IPS would undertake this task,” explains Brigadier General Beck. “Although the IPS works only with inmates, most of the offenders requiring monitoring are, in any event, inmates and the IPS is the agency that knows them best. As law enforcement agents, we are very familiar with the manipulateness of sex offenders. At the treatment level, the IPS began to establish a special wing for sex offenders at Masiyahu Prison without any connection to the law, the IPS’ Center for Emotional Health (the CEH) has for many years been involved in the area of assessing the dangerousness of offenders and treating them, and special treatment groups for sex offenders already existed at the IPS. The skills were there and were being utilized.”

Ever since the law’s passage and with the help of the Ministry of Public Security, the IPS made the necessary preparations for the

integration of the new unit in its organizational structure. It was decided to implement it in stages, according to a professional ranking procedure that would first provide a solution to the most dangerous populations: In the first stage (October 2006) monitoring orders would be imposed for inmates who were released after serving their sentence in full, in other words, who were convicted and did not have their sentence reduced by one third because of good behavior; in the second stage (October 2007) monitoring orders would also be imposed for those who committed sex offenses against children, in other words, those who committed sex offenses against minors but were not sent to prison or who had their sentence reduced by one third because of good behavior; in the third stage (October 2008) orders would also be imposed for those who had their sentence reduced by one third because of good behavior; and in the final stage (October 2011), all other offenders would be included - namely, those who committed sex offenses against adults but were not sent to prison.

Creating the right team for the task

Although the Law for Protecting the Public from Sex Offenders went into effect on October 1, 2006, the IPS had already begun the

organizational preparations for its implementation six months earlier: The official order was drafted, staff workers were carefully chosen, and, a month before the law went into effect, the new unit was already in place.

The Unit for Monitoring Sex Offenders has a staff of 12: six supervisors and six professional staff workers - a commander, a criminologist, a legal adviser, an assessment and treatment programs officer, an intelligence and assessment officer, and a coordination officer. “The screening was rigorous,” emphasized Zer, “the supervisors have a background of professional work in the IPS, whether in command or treatment positions, and they are very much aware of the caution with which the law must be implemented. The law itself specifies that it must be implemented with caution: The offender being monitored is a human being and a free citizen. Those who were chosen for the role of supervisors have a high level of motivation and treatment awareness and a humane approach that are combined with professional ability, strong familiarity with the system, proven experience and a profound understanding of what is expected of them professionally.”

However, rigorous screening is insufficient: “All the supervisors have undergone a training process,” explains Zer, “that included learning

about their target population, training in the legal field (an understanding of the law and its ramifications), and policing (subjects such as the use of the Internet for pornographic purposes, searches, questioning, long-range goals, short-range objectives, apprehension and observation). This is the practical side that the IPS has not placed that much emphasis on up until now. Parallel to the training, the unit is becoming more consolidated: Procedures, an implementation protocol and contents are being established.

Since this is an operational unit with a highly specific task, the technological aspect was given special attention. “We wanted the unit to have the proper operational and computing equipment, including tape recorders, video cameras and surveillance tools; we felt like James Bond,” Zer recalls with a laugh. “It is the general understanding here that this is a different unit whose task must be clearly defined and which requires the assistance of external agencies. The supervisors would wear civilian clothes and work at all hours of the day and night, including Fridays, Saturdays and night shifts. Slowly but surely, the feeling developed that we were members of an operational unit and a real esprit de corps formed.”

The Unit for Monitoring Sex Offenders receives assessments of dangerousness levels from the CEH regarding offenders who will soon be released;

the assessments are sent four months before the scheduled release from prison. For those individuals assessed as between moderately to highly dangerous, the unit formulates recommendations for the conditions of supervision. “The conditions of supervision,” explains Zer, “can include various instructions and prohibitions: for example, the offender being forbidden from approaching minors; being under house arrest at night; and being prohibited from living in or even visiting a certain district, from establishing or maintaining any contact with victims or from possessing pornographic material. The unit submits the recommendations to the state prosecutor’s office, which, in turn, recommends that an order of supervision be issued. The law’s ‘teeth’ are the penalty imposed in case the order is violated, and violation of the conditions of supervision can mean up to two years in prison.”

Careful supervision

In Israel’s prisons today, there are some 1,200 sex offenders. Over the next 12 months, 180 of them are expected to be released, after serving a full sentence. The unit anticipates that 100 of these released inmates will be referred to it for supervision, which will be handled by the six supervisors. “I am asked whether this kind of supervision - carried out once a week - is really

sufficient,” notes Zer.

“However, it should be pointed that this is the practice in other countries enforcing similar legislation. In no country do you have a situation where one supervisor carries out surveillance on a single individual for an entire 24-hour period. Those who work with sex offenders know that there is the phenomenon of a constantly expanding “circle of attack.” If you know the offender you are supervising, you will also know how to recognize the point where the offender is starting to go downhill, and that is when you have to intervene.”

Unlike what is commonly thought, most sex offenders, explains Zer, do not look for their victims at every possible moment: “There is the belief in the general public that sex offenders spend the entire day wandering around and raping victims, that they are serial rapists like Benny Sela [a convicted serial rapist currently serving a sentence in the Israeli prison system]. However, in reality, most of them move very slowly into a situation where they will commit an offense - they collect material, increase their level of stimulation and only then do they commit the offense. A supervisor who knows how to keep close tabs on the persons being supervised knows how to recognize the signs and will be able to pinpoint the right moment for taking action. When the moment for taking action arises, the supervisor

can try to speak to the offender and explain, 'Right now, you are in a dangerous situation. Watch yourself.' If that does not work, the supervisor can conclude that the person being supervised is not cooperating; in that case, the supervisor can report that the order of supervision is being violated. From experience gained here and in the rest of the world, it is a well-known fact among the experts that, for sex offenders, as opposed to other kinds of offenders, the very fact of supervision serves as a powerful restraining device. The supervisory framework actually helps sex offenders - some of them realize that they are capable of harmful acts but they are unable to control themselves. The supervision helps them to restrain themselves. Thus, the supervisory element is also a treatment factor."

The new law's "labor pains"

Ronit Zer's richly varied career in the Israel Prison Service attests not only to the wide range of opportunities that this organization offers its workers, but also to an exceptional personality that constantly seeks new challenges. "As far as my professional training is concerned, I have a Bachelor's degree in criminology and I entered the IPS as a social worker," Zer recalls with a smile. "I subsequently served in various capacities until I became head of the Diagnosis

and Screening Division at Nitzan. That division is the national center for absorbing inmates who have recently been sentenced and it is responsible for the diagnostic and screening procedures in all the various prisons throughout Israel. There I was exposed to all sorts of prisoners, I learned about various phenomena, and I considerably broadened my understanding of sex offenders."

Like all those serving under her command, Zer regards her new job as a "social mission that goes beyond the duties required in this post; we all have children out there." The fact that she is privileged to be the first person to head such a unit adds to her motivation and to her desire to create, to build and to initiate. However, every beginning has its difficulties, especially if your job is interconnected with other governmental agencies; thus, at first, things do not run as smoothly as you want: "We all have a tremendous desire to perform our duties as best as humanly possible but we are being slightly held back for the moment. We have received very few assessments of dangerousness levels; we are dependent on the CEH and we are not making the kind of progress we had anticipated. I assume that these are merely the labor pains of a new law and that the whole matter will soon be solved. Everyone who hears about this new law cannot understand how we managed without it up until

now. I am confident that, the moment one aspect will be ironed out and will be given public attention, everything will start to move forward."

In her job at Nitzan, Zer learned at close range that it is no easy task to deal with the manipulateness and false impressions that are characteristic of sex offenders: "I remember the case of the Rapist from the South, because I classified him. He was a very difficult rapist, like the kind you see in the movies. When he was in prison, he was very cooperative. He would go out on furloughs and the system simply went into a 'slumber mode' with regard to this individual. Then, on his third furlough, he fled the country. Some sex offenders can be very clever and very manipulative, and you must be very careful not to make a mistake when you assess their degree of dangerousness."

Unlike the other special units in the IPS, the Unit for Monitoring Sex Offenders does not yet have a hall of fame; however, Zer is not worried: "Today, the unit is like a tiny blossom in its initial stage of operations. However, I am confident that, in a few years, people will say, 'How did we manage without this unit?' I do not think that I am envisaging a state of utopia; it just seems so logical. After all, throughout the world, this kind of unit is an integral part of the correction system. With a little push, everything will begin to pick up speed."