



## Caught in the Web; new legislation targets cyberstalkers

by [Meg Handley](#)

*May 13, 2009*

Efforts to deter high-tech cyberstalking in Illinois are likely to get a boost from state lawmakers in the form of legislation strengthening the state's criminal code.

The legislation refines the definition of stalking to include current and future technologies stalkers might use to track and intimidate victims. According to the Senate sponsor of the bill Toi Hutchinson (D-Olympia Fields), passage of the bill, slated for a vote this week in the Senate, would "make sure the criminal code addresses this crime in the 21st century world we face today ... I don't see any opposition to this at all."

Growing concern among victim advocates and law enforcement agencies unable to adequately respond to complaints of cyberstalking prompted the joint effort to draft the legislation by Attorney General Lisa Madigan's office, state legislators and community justice organizations.

"Both in Illinois and across the United States, we're just trying to play catch-up with technology when it comes to protecting people," said Vickie Smith, executive director of the Illinois Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

While Smith acknowledged the benefits of advancements in technology, she stressed the need for awareness about the potential abuses, as well.

"This is an attempt to apply some of the same responses to stalking via computers and phone systems as we have in our laws where you actually have somebody out driving up and down the street or showing up in the same places," Smith said.

Though computer-savvy stalkers continue to manipulate computers, phones, GPS technology and most recently spyware, to harass victims, House co-sponsor Karen Yarbrough (D-Broadview) said the more specific language in the bill will give law enforcement better tools to investigate and prosecute cyberstalking crimes.

"With advances in technology and weaknesses in the current law, stalkers are finding new ways to harass and intimidate their victims," Yarbrough said in a news release. "It's important that we

expand the definition of stalking to give law enforcement the tools they need to deal with this serious crime.”

Though cyberstalking expert and victim advocate Alexis A. Moore said Illinois’ legislative efforts are a move in the right direction, more needs to be done to better prepare law enforcement and victim advocate organizations to respond to cyberstalking.

“The tech era no longer provides law enforcement and prosecutors with a smoking gun,” Moore said in an e-mail. “In order for cyberstalking incidents to be better understood, it will require more training, education of law enforcement, prosecutors and victim advocates as well as an increased public awareness in order to be successful in combating cybercrime.”

With about two weeks left in the legislative session, Hutchinson said she’s pushing hard to get the bill passed and on to Gov. Pat Quinn, but doesn’t anticipate any opposition to the proposed bill.

“We wanted to give police officers and prosecutors more teeth in terms of arrest and prosecution for these acts,” Hutchinson said. “We also needed to make clear that people can use all different forms of technology to accomplish the same end, and that is no longer acceptable in the state of Illinois.”

“Yes, we’ll move with the times, but so will our criminal code,” she added.