

## Local delegate's legislation targets 'cyberbullying'

Mother recounts damage suffered by daughter

By LIAM FARRELL, Staff Writer

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The mother of a teenage girl who was the victim of cyberbullies implored lawmakers yesterday to pass legislation that would make such harassment a crime.

"I wanted to throw up," said the Anne Arundel County woman, who requested anonymity for fear of reprisals. "I was horrified."

She told lawmakers that a MySpace page had her daughter's name and photograph, but she didn't recognize the person it described. The 13-year-old girl was referred to in vulgar, obscene and promiscuous terms in the posting.

Friends of her daughter had created a MySpace account in her name and filled it with material that defamed the girl, the mother said. The police were powerless, however, because, under Maryland law, nothing illegal occurred.

Since the posting was public, there are still repercussions from the incident, and the woman worries about who could have received contact information from MySpace.

"I want there to be accountability," she said before testifying to the House Judiciary Committee on a bill to outlaw cyberbullying. "There needs to be some sort of



Courtesy photo

Del. Nic Kipke, R-Pasadena



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punishment."

With technology moving faster than the courts, a local delegate wants the state to create criminal penalties for bullying people electronically through social networking Web sites such as MySpace and Facebook.

Del. Nic Kipke, R-Pasadena, has introduced legislation to make it a crime for someone to use an electronic communication to harass someone or that person's immediate family.

Under current state law, a person is prohibited only from using electronic mail with the intent to harass one or more persons or by sending lewd, lascivious or obscene material. Penalties for violating the law are imprisonment for one year, a \$500 fine, or both.

The bill would keep the penalties the same, but would add any electronic communication to the forms of outlawed harassment.

"The point is allowing law enforcement to get involved and stop something before it becomes a tragedy," Kipke said yesterday before the hearing.

The best-known case of cyberbully-ing occurred in Missouri in 2006 when 13-year-old Megan Meier hanged herself after being humiliated by information posted on a fictitious MySpace account. Last year, Missouri Gov. Matt Blunt signed a law removing the requirement that harassment had to be written or over a telephone.

Research shows cyberbullying is a growing problem, said Dr. Davina Pruitt of Educational Technology Policy, Research and Outreach. It can result in absenteeism, behavior problems, and drug and alcohol abuse.

A 2008 study by Harvard University found online harassment is becoming the most feared threat among the nation's youth.

"It is an issue that is spiraling out of control," Pruitt said.

Although a version of the bill failed last year, Kipke said he worked to address constitutional concerns about free speech.

Supporters of the bill include the State Attorney General's Office and the Anne Arundel County Council of PTAs.

"We need to make sure that there is a penalty for this kind of harassment," Anita V.

Owens, the PTA president, stated in a letter to the committee. "Bullying comes in many different ways in today's world and we must protect our children from all kinds of bullying."

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