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The Boston Globe

YMCAs begin to screen for sex offenders

By [Matt Rocheleau](#)

Globe Correspondent / January 2, 2011

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The YMCA of Greater Boston has begun screening all current and prospective members and guests against the state's registered sex offender list, banning access to those classified as Level 2 or Level 3 offenders — those at moderate or high risk of reoffending.

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The measure, which took effect yesterday, follows the recommendation of a statewide YMCA task force created to improve safety at the community centers after a former girls basketball coach at the Melrose YMCA, which is run independently of the Greater Boston

organization, was arrested in early 2009 and pleaded guilty last summer to sexually assaulting girls at the club.

The incident “raised our own level of expectations to see what we can do to further minimize the risk for our members,” said Kelley Rice, spokeswoman for YMCA of Greater Boston, the largest Y organization in Massachusetts. It has 13 branches — nine in Boston and one each in Needham, Waltham, Reading, and Woburn.

Guests and members will be screened through the Y's standard application process. Software will check applicant names for matches in the state sex offender registry. Rice said the system may at times be a “minor inconvenience” for patrons but should not cause significant delays.

Brad McDermott, a spokesman for YMCA of USA, the national resource organization that councils the independently run Ys, said such policies are a growing trend at Ys nationally, especially as technology has allowed screening to be done more efficiently.

“The safety and well-being of kids in our care has been and always will be our priority,” he said.

Massachusetts and Rhode Island Ys that don't already screen for sex offenders are expected to implement similar policies in the coming months, Y officials said. That will allow for consistency as most, if not all, Ys in the two states participate in a program allowing members to use other Y facilities for free.

In Massachusetts, the Melrose Y; the Greater Lynn Ys in Peabody, Saugus, and Lynn; and the Hockomock Area Ys in North Attleborough, Franklin, Mansfield, and Foxborough already screen for sex offenders. YMCA Southcoast, with branches in New Bedford, Fall River, Mattapoisett,

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The Melrose Y began banning potential members and guests who are registered sex offenders even before the former coach was arrested, said executive director Diana Brennan.

"At Ys, there's a unique mix of both adults and children . . . so doing this screening is so important for our members," she said by phone. "It's all the more important given what had happened."

Neither Brennan nor Bruce Macdonald, chief executive of the Greater Lynn Y, which began overseeing the Melrose branch earlier this year, knew when the policy took effect. Within the past year, around two or three new members in Melrose have been found to be registered sex offenders and subsequently banned, Macdonald said.

Some are concerned that the screenings add an unfair burden for those who have completed their sentences and already face barriers as they try to reintegrate into society. The Boston-based Reform Sex Offender Laws campaign says that such steps can further ostracize sex offenders, making them more susceptible to poverty, homelessness, depression, and substance abuse.

In Massachusetts, information on Level 1 sex offenders, considered at low risk of reoffending, is not public. According to the state database, there are 253 Level 2 and 245 Level 3 offenders in Boston.

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Correction: Due to incorrect information provided to the Globe, this story about the new sex offender screening policy at the YMCA of Greater Boston misstated the YMCA Southcoast's policy. YMCA Southcoast has banned facility access to level 2 and level 3 sex offenders for the past seven years ■

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