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Johnson: Amendment will help stop predators

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U.S. Rep. Nancy Johnson, R-5th Dist., and U.S. Attorney Kevin O'Connor toured the Federal Bureau of Investigation's "Innocent Images" unit in New Haven Friday.

There, agents conduct Internet sex crimes investigations and train law enforcement officers. Johnson viewed Internet chat rooms where FBI agents pose as minors and are approached by adult predators.

Earlier in the week, the House passed Johnson's amendment to provide \$3.3 million more for a FBI task force that stops Internet sex predators and brings them to justice.

The amendment's passage came on the same day a man from Sherman, Conn., was sentenced to eight years in prison for using the Internet to coerce a minor into sexual acts.

"My amendment puts more muscle behind our efforts to stop Internet predators and bring them to justice," Johnson told The Herald Press. "Cyberstalkers are a clear danger to our children. Predators can reach into our homes through the Internet. We must give law enforcement more resources to combat this growing threat."

The bill Johnson wrote three years ago gave police new tools to stop cyberstalkers. Her amendment will allow the FBI to dedicate more agents to this critical beat.

"I thank dedicated law enforcement officers working to keep our kids safe from cyberstalkers," she said.

Kimberly Mertz, Special Agent in Charge of the New Haven FBI office, said the additional funding provided by this amendment will significantly enhance and support ongoing cyber-crime investigations.

"This enhancement in funding will especially support the already highly successful Innocent Images National Initiative which identifies,

investigates, and prosecutes sexual predators who use the Internet and other online services to sexually exploit children," Mertz said. "This additional funding will provide tools and training needed for law enforcement to establish a presence on the Internet as a deterrent to those engaged in the sexual exploitation of children."

"The need to invest greater resources in the FBI's Innocent Images Unit is clear," Johnson said.

Her amendment to the Justice Department's annual spending bill increases federal funding for the Innocent Images program by \$3.3 million more than what the bill originally recommended, resulting in a 25 percent funding increase over last year. The amendment passed by a unanimous voice vote late Tuesday, and the larger spending bill is expected to pass the House this week.

The U.S. Attorney General says 50,000 sex predators are logged on to Internet chat rooms and social networking Web sites like MySpace.com.

The FBI has seen a 2,000 percent increase in Internet predator cases over 10 years.

Reports of online sex predators to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's CyberTipline have grown from 20,000 to 390,000 a year since 2000.

The FBI currently dedicates twice as many agents to tracking online predators as its resources allow. The FBI's Cyber-Division Section Chief Raul Roldan testified before Congress in May that the FBI has dedicated 242 agents to child exploitation and pornography cases, yet the budget only funds 127 positions within the program.

In 2003, Johnson passed legislation giving law enforcement new wiretapping authority to catch suspected sex predators before they strike. Officers say online predators often use a phone call to arrange meetings, and this

new authority allows police to intervene before these meetings take place. Johnson's law was passed after a 13-year-old Danbury girl was killed by a Greenwich man she met on the Internet. Her attacker is serving a 40-year prison sentence. Authorities have urged parents to closely monitor their children's online activity to help lessen the risk posed by online predators.

Information on staying safe online can be found at Netsmartz.org, a joint project by the Justice Department, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, the Boys and Girls Clubs of America, and other groups.