By MICHAEL FELBERBAUM, Associated Press Writer

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RICHMOND, Va. - Attorney General Bob McDonnell said Monday he will seek legislation requiring convicted sex offenders to register their online identities with the state to help MySpace and other online hangouts more easily block access.

If enacted, Virginia would be the first state to require registration of e-mail addresses and instant-messaging identities on the state’s sex offender registry, McDonnell’s office said.

"We require all sex offenders to register their physical and mailing addresses in Virginia, but in the 21st century it is just as critical that they register any e-mail addresses or IM screen names," McDonnell said in a news release.

Parents, school administrators and law-enforcement authorities have grown increasingly worried that teens are at risk on MySpace and other social-networking sites, which provide tools for messaging, sharing photos and creating personal pages known as profiles.

MySpace announced plans last week to develop technologies designed to help block convicted sex offenders by checking profiles against government registries, but the News Corp. site’s ability to do so is limited by the fact that users do not have to use their real names.

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Requiring registrations of e-mail addresses would make matching easier. To guard against offenders registering one address but using another on MySpace, the penalty would be the same as it would be for not registering or for providing incorrect information, which could result in a misdemeanor or felony charge.

There are more than 550,000 registered sex offenders in the United States, including 13,000 in Virginia. McDonnell said e-mail registration requirements are better done at the state level because most prosecutions and convictions for sex offenders are under state jurisdiction.

Hemanshu Nigam, MySpace’s chief security officer, applauded the Virginia...
"This legislation is an important recognition that the Internet has become a community as real as any other neighborhood and is in need of similar safeguards," Nigam said.

Nigam said the information would also give law enforcement new tools to "employ against predators who attempt to misuse the Internet to find potential victims."

Donna Rice Hughes, president of the Internet safety group Enough Is Enough and a member of Virginia's Youth Internet Safety Task Force, said that although there's no "silver bullet," the legislation will be a helpful part of the solution.

U.S. Sens. Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., and John McCain, R-Ariz., last week announced plans for similar federal legislation to apply to those on probation or parole. The Virginia proposal is not limited to those still on probation or parole.

The state proposal stems from discussions with MySpace and the safety task force and is part of a package of proposals the task force will announce Dec. 20.

Regardless of e-mail registration requirements, MySpace is deploying within a month a database that will contain the names and physical descriptions of convicted sex offenders in the United States. An automated system will search for matches between the database and MySpace user profiles. Employees will then delete any profiles that match.

Skeptics say such technologies will address only part of the problem, as much of the danger comes from sexual predators who have never been convicted and thus are not in the databases.

"Most of the people who are molesting children or sexually exploiting children that they encounter online are not registered sex offenders," said Parry Aftab, executive director of WiredSafety.org.
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