

Tracking offenders

Page Jail first to implement VINE system

By Jamie Turner

It can be a family's worst nightmare.

It was for the family of Mary Byron.

The 21-year-old Kentucky woman was murdered by a former boyfriend on her birthday in 1993, after he was released from prison for stalking, assaulting and raping her. Byron was not notified of the man's release.

Almost one year to the day of her murder, the Victim Information and Notification Everyday (VINE) system was introduced in Kentucky. The system allows victims to obtain timely and reliable information about criminal offenders 24 hours a day — over the telephone, through the Internet, or by e-mail. Victims, family members or other concerned citizens can also call to inquire about the current status of an inmate, and can register to be notified immediately upon a change, such as transfer, release or escape.

In November, Page County introduced the VINE system at its local jail — the first sheriff's department in Virginia to implement the system.

"We want to stay on top of these situations because a lot of things can fall through the cracks," said Page Sheriff Daniel W. Presgraves. "We want to stay on this because it could save someone's life and that's what it's all about."

In August, Gov. Tim Kaine announced that the criminal tracking and victim notification system already being used in Virginia prisons would be expanded to include offenders held in local jails like Page County. The initiative is a partnership between Virginia Sheriff's Association (VSA) and the Virginia Community Policing Institute (VCPI).

Over the next two-and-a-half years, the expanded service will be implemented in all of the state's city, county and regional prisons and jails. The VSA received a

\$1.25 million grant to fund the expansion.

"The VINE service is one of the nation's largest and most successful e-government program, providing crime victims and other citizens with free, updated offender information 24 hours every day," said Kaine in a recent press release. "This tracking system provides additional peace of mind to those who have been victimized by criminals, and law enforcement officials tell us it can be an invaluable tool in serving and protecting our people."

The Page County Jail was selected as one of the pilot agencies to implement the VINE program.

"This is pretty important to us because there are victims in every county," said Presgraves, chairman of the VSA's committee implementing the program. "This system takes all human error out of it. They are either in jail or not."

The VINE system has been endorsed by "America's Most Wanted" host John Walsh.

VINE is completely anonymous and can be used by anyone. A victim or concerned citizen can access VINE by calling 1-800-467-4943 or by visiting www.vinelink.com online.

Victims may call or register by knowing the offender's name and spelling part of it out on the telephone or by calling and getting the person's arrest number from jail staff, said Presgraves.

"The automated system will give citizens a list of persons incarcerated on that booking number because several facilities use the same software, so there may be multiple persons incarcerated on that number," said Presgraves. "They simply pick the number that corresponds to the person they want to be notified about. They enter the telephone number that they want to be notified at, and they will be asked to create a four-digit PIN number."

VINE will call continuously for a minimum of 24 hours or until the person answering the phone at the number registered enters the PIN number.

However, the criminal offenders must be in a facility using the VINE system.

Prior to implementing VINE, locally there was no program available to alert victims or citizens when a dangerous offender may be released or escaped from police custody.

"We flagged it on our computers, but it wasn't a full proof thing," said Presgraves.
"This is on the spot notification. It's just another step in the right direction."