

Notification System Marks 10th Year

By Robin Mero
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Juna Hamilton got the call twice.

She doesn't often think about the man who murdered her sister in 1991 until she gets calls alerting her he is taking action to get out of prison.

Four years ago, she got messages on her answering machine Ricky Roberts sought clemency from the governor for his life sentence. The family sent letters objecting. Roberts was denied.

This month, she got one of the messages again.

Hamilton returned home from work on a Monday afternoon to find a message on her answering machine. The phone soon rang again with an automated voice informing her of an Aug. 3 hearing. She went straight to her computer and drafted letters to newspaper editors and a pleading message to the state Parole Board.

"Please, please ... do not give this murderer early release. Ricky Dale Roberts shot my sister Ruth Ann Roberts five times in the back of her head in front of her four small children and neighbors on July 25, 1991," she wrote.

Arkansas law allows Ricky Roberts, who shot Ruth Ann during an argument after the couple divorced, to seek clemency after serving at least 12 years in prison. Roberts pleaded guilty to first-degree murder before Benton County Circuit Judge Tom Keith in a plea bargain that removed the "without chance of parole" clause from his life sentence. He can keep asking for release the rest of his life. His applications state he believes his sentence is excessive.

But the law also considers family members of Ruth Ann Roberts. If they register with the state, they are notified each time Ricky Roberts is moved, granted some type of hearing or granted work release. They also would be notified if he were to escape from prison or even if he died.

Arkansas was first in the country to establish a victim notification system. The Victim Information Notification Everyday program marks its 10th year this month, said Rick Stallings, who oversees the program at the Arkansas Crime Information Center.

Arkansas' system is open, meaning anyone can use it, and it's anonymous. Users can choose telephone or e-mail notification. All services are free to the public, Stallings said.

During its first year, in the last half of 1998, 621 people registered to be notified. So far this year, that number is 8,662, according to the center.

Registrations increased quickly after e-mail notification was added and the system was linked to the Department of Correction Web site, where people searching for inmate records are offered an opportunity to register, Stallings said.

Next year, photos of offenders will be added to the system and people living within one mile of a prison can register for notification if an inmate escapes.



Offenders on parole are also tracked - notifications go out if they move, commit another crime or a supervision period ends.

The service cost the state \$543,245 last year, Stallings said.

During 2007, the system delivered 17,412 phone calls and 19,505 e-mail messages to registrants. Calls are made each 30 minutes for 24 hours or until confirmed. Messages are left on machines every two hours. Services for the hearing impaired were added last month.

Notifications for hearings begin 120 days prior, according to the crime information center's Web site.

The public can also search for information without registering at www.vinlink.com. Last year, almost half a million searches were performed on the system, Stallings said.

About 33 states have statewide services through the same vendor Arkansas uses. The system was created after a Louisville, Ky., woman was murdered in 1993 by an ex-boyfriend who was recently released on bail for a rape and kidnapping charge. The woman had been promised notification by law enforcement officials but didn't get it in time, according to the Web site.

Jail systems are interfaced with the program. Information from the state's 88 larger jails is pulled each 15 minutes and from the state Department of Correction each hour. So, when someone is booked in a county jail, a victim could register almost immediately, Stallings said.

Arkansas legislators established the program in 1997, along with a new victims' rights law. State law requires the program be made available for victims of violent crime, but the state goes further by providing tracking of virtually anyone booked in a jail, Stallings said.

In the future, the crime information center seeks to increase usage beyond tracking prison inmates. Prosecutors have program terminals in their offices and can upload information about upcoming hearings to the system, allowing victims to track defendants throughout the court process.

Stallings said prosecutors don't always use this. Washington County doesn't, and Benton County has but not much during the past two years, he said.

The efforts are time-consuming, and both Benton and Washington county prosecutors said their offices emphasize personal contact with victims. Deputy prosecutors and victim assistance coordinators keep victims informed of upcoming hearings by phone, said Prosecutor Van Stone in Benton County and Prosecutor John Threet in Washington County.

Stallings said a handful of prosecutor offices upload court dates, but this is optional. It's one part of the program that can be improved and enhanced.

Ruth Ann Roberts' family members said they appreciate notification of Ricky Roberts' status because they want a chance to object to his release.

Hamilton described her sister as a cute tomboy, infectiously happy, who never ventured far from hometown Gentry. She worked at Mc-Kee Baking Co., and loved to play softball. Her four children are now ages 18 to 28.

Ruth Ann Roberts would be 47 now and, because she didn't get to enjoy her life, those everyday pleasures should be denied of Roberts, who just turned 50, Hamilton said.

"If he was 70 or 75 now, he'd have lost most of his life. He still has a lot of things to enjoy, and I don't think he should. There's no reason he should enjoy anything in life."

FAST FACTS

Victim Information And Notification Everyday (VINE) New Registrations

2008 to date: 8,662

2007: 13,211

2006: 6,360

2005: 4,602

1998*: 621

* Inaugural year, figure is from June to December.

Source Arkansas Crime Information Center