

Inmate, parolee tracker useful to victims

By [Will Hoover](#)

Advertiser Staff Writer

Say you were mugged, beaten and robbed, and the scoundrel who put you in the hospital was nabbed, convicted and sent to the slammer. Yet you worry because you testified against him. What if the crook escapes? What if he comes looking for you? You wish there were some way to keep tabs on the bad guy.

There is.

Today marks the first anniversary of a service in Hawai'i that allows anyone to locate a criminal inmate or parolee, learn the offender's status, and even register for automatic updates on any changes to the custody status of the offender. The bad guy gets loose and within 15 minutes you get a call or e-mail, or both, letting you know about it. Operated under a federal grant by the state Department of Public Safety, the service is known as the Statewide Automated Victim Information and Notification, or SAVIN, system. Established as a way for victims to keep track of their offenders, the system is free, confidential, and offers lives operators around the clock 365 days a year. Victims remain anonymous.

Since SAVIN began on Feb. 28, 2009, its Web site received more than 65,000 hits. Today there are 1,860 subscribers registered to be notified in case their offender's status has changed.

"I think the SAVIN initiative is long overdue," said Tommy Johnson, deputy director for corrections in Hawai'i. "I think it's great for providing the victims some degree of comfort with respect to where the offender is in the criminal justice system. So it may help allay their fears that the person is out or maybe after them."

Jenny and Tip Gilbert have used SAVIN. The Gilbert's daughter, Maile, 6, was kidnapped and murdered in Kailua in 1985.

The MAILE Alert system — which notifies the public of abducted children in Hawai'i through radio and TV bulletins and electronic highway billboards — was named after their daughter.

Call for a crook

Her murderer, James Lounsbury, is serving a life sentence in Utah. To track his status, the Gilbert's can call an 877 number, or go to www.vinelink.com and click on Hawai'i — one of 40 states that are part of the same system.

"I think SAVIN is invaluable," said Jenny Gilbert. "It's incredible. I pretty much keep track on a regular basis. And because I'm computer illiterate, I just always call."

But what she appreciates most about SAVIN is its automatic alerts should Lounsbury's status change. Knowing she and her husband will be notified immediately has meant a lot, she said.

"That, right there, is the most valuable thing you can possibly imagine for peace of mind," Gilbert said.

Lacene Terri, statewide victim services coordinator for the state Public Safety Department, said SAVIN isn't restricted to victims.

"It's an open system," Terri said. "You don't have to necessarily be the victim of a crime. You have two options: You can telephone the automated notification system, or you can speak to a live operator. That's one option. The other option is to go online, at www.vinelink.com."

Johnson said SAVIN is a tool that can be used by investigators as well as an offender's family.

"Investigators who may be looking for offenders can look them up and see if they are in custody," he said. "Family members of offenders can look them up and see exactly where they are, if they are convicted and sentenced to prison, where they are or when their next parole hearing might be.

"So I think the system is good for all concerned, and it provides another level of open government for the taxpayers." Johnson is concerned about keeping the system going after its federal grant runs out on June 30, 2011. The U.S. Department of Justice requires states to seek sources of permanent funding when providing the initial funding for the project, Johnson said. His department has given the House Finance Committee a cost projection of \$400,000 after federal money runs out. The year after that, the projected cost will be lower, just under \$300,000.

"I believe that the cost to maintain the system we are building now with federal dollars would be in the best interest of the state, the victims and the criminal justice system as a whole, because it's an open system," he said. "We would encourage the Legislature to support any measure that would provide permanent funding for the SAVIN project."

Reach Will Hoover at whoover@honoluluadvertiser.com.