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Victims reach out to VINE for help

Alert sent out when inmate's status changes in prison or jail

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PEORIA - When he swore to get even with her, Karen feared for her life and started losing sleep. Even after her ex-husband was arrested for aggravated domestic battery, she still could not stop thinking about what might happen when or if he was released.

"I was scared sick," Karen, asking to be identified only by her first name, said of her violent and traumatic divorce. "He said he wanted me dead."

Eventually, Karen's worrying stopped. The reason, she said, was a simple phone call telling her he was still behind bars.

"It's probably the only reason I get to sleep at night. It takes a big weight off your shoulders," she said.

Called Victim Information and Notification Everyday, or VINE, the system automatically alerts crime victims, like Karen, or concerned citizens within 15 minutes after the release, escape or change in an inmate's status in state prisons or county jails.

After signing up anonymously online or through a phone call, the service generates an e-mail or phone message to warn the victim. Phone calls continue for several hours until users confirm the warning was received by entering a four-digit code.

The system is operated by Appriss Inc., a Kentucky-based company that provides round-the-clock telephone operators and automated calling to reach victims.

"They know right away what happens. They can go on and start rebuilding their lives," said Jennifer Recktenwald, a public relations specialist with Appriss.

The VINE system came about after a woman in Louisville, Ky., was fatally shot by her abusive former boyfriend in December 1993. Thinking he was still jailed for assaulting her, Mary Byron never knew someone posted his bail and secured his release until the enraged man fired seven bullets into her head and chest at point-blank range.

Neither she nor Byron's family was notified of his release.

"This is a system that, had it been in place, could have saved Mary," Byron's father, John Byron, has said. "It's too late for Mary, but there are still a lot of victims out there."

Public outrage over the killing prompted law enforcement and community officials to create the automated telephone system one year later.

Both state and local officials say the VINE system provides comfort to victims who live in fear of their assailant.

"I think it gives them peace of mind," said Michael Bastien, coordinator of Illinois's victim notification system. "The response has been great. Over the years as we implemented it, the stats have shot up."

About 34,500 people have registered for the notification service since 2001, when it became available to residents in Illinois, Bastien said. The system is available statewide, though some counties are not fully linked, and Cook County runs its own service separate from the rest of the state.

Since November of the same year, the system has sent out 210,925 phone calls to users and 28,404 e-mail notifications. It has received 169,198 incoming calls.

"We're at least registering five to 10 people a month. I've actually signed myself up for victims who don't have telephone numbers," said Corie Sego, violence victim coordinator for the Peoria County state's attorney. "Some sign up for VINE, but they are still calling the jail every hour."

Although an inmate's status has always been a matter of public record, victims often had to call repeatedly and sometimes to multiple agencies, officials said.

"It can get confusing for people," Sego said. "Unfortunately some people are coming in here when the offender is already released."

Through her work with victims at the state's attorney's office, Sego said she has seen the program help many individuals in need. Some victims of domestic battery head straight to a shelter when they receive word of a release, she said.

One woman, thinking her significant other could not post bail, never sought an order of protection against him. Within minutes after getting the phone call about his release, she was calling Sego to start the paperwork.

"It prompted her that she would be in some kind of danger," Sego said. "Had she not been notified by VINE, she would not have known he had been released."

Users can sign up by logging on to www.vinelink.com or by calling (866) 566-8439. The number also offers up-to-date information on the offender's status and his or her case.

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