

Victims of crime can track inmates

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By Torsten Ove, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Allegheny County yesterday became the 42nd Pennsylvania county to join a computer network to help victims of crime track the status of jail inmates.

The Statewide Automated Victim Information & Notification system, or SAVIN, allows residents to receive real-time information about inmates around the clock.

Victims and their families who sign up for the free service will now be notified by a phone call or e-mail of an offender's release, transfer or escape from custody.

A similar system already exists for state prisoners through the Office of Victim Advocate.

Residents have also long been able to track state inmates on the Department of Corrections Web site. Likewise, federal prisoners can be tracked on the U.S. Bureau of Prisons site.

But the SAVIN system, paid for by a \$1.25 million U.S. Justice Department grant, covers county inmates and offers the added security of notification within 15 minutes of an offender's release from custody.

"As soon as an inmate is entered into our system, it automatically interfaces with the software," said Warden Ramon Rustin.

B.J. Horn, director of victim services at the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency, said the network provides peace of mind.

"For some victims," she said, "being able to check on a prisoner's status before going to bed, or on the anniversary of the crime, is the difference between going to sleep that night or staying up to pace the floor."

SAVIN is being run by Kentucky-based Appriss Inc., which launched the nation's first victim-notification service, called VINE, in 1994 following the murder of 21-year-old Mary Byron the year before in Louisville.

She had been stalked and raped by a former boyfriend. He went to jail but was released on bond. Ms. Byron didn't know he was out.

On Dec. 6, 1993, he approached her car and shot her to death.

The murder stunned Louisville but also galvanized local officials and software engineers into action.

Appriss, which in 2000 provided seed money for the Mary Byron Foundation charity, now runs the VINELink Web site used in 34 states.

In Pennsylvania, Centre County was the first to use the technology on its own in 2005. Last year, Erie County was the first to join under the Justice Department grant program.

Locally, Butler and Washington counties were already part of the network and Fayette County will join today.

To register for the new service here, visit www.pacrimevictims.state.pa.us or call 1-866-972-7284.