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News

A SAVIN grace for crime victims in Delco

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MEDIA — At Tuesday's unveiling of the county's victim notification system, Kim Ferrell said knowing the release date of her daughter's killer freed her from becoming defined by tragedy.

The mother of the late 16-year-old Faith Sinclair, who was fatally struck down by Lemuel Payne in a hit-and-run accident in August 2008, Ferrell said the Pennsylvania Statewide Automated Victim Information and Notification — PA SAVIN — system helped her choose to live her life.

"Victims of crimes can choose to define who they are by what happened to them, or they can choose to make it part of their story," Ferrell said at a Delaware County Council press conference. "Programs like this help people like me make it a part of my story, instead of the loss of my daughter defining who I am."

Surrounded by a throng of area police chiefs, Delaware County District Attorney G. Michael Green joined county council Chairman Jack Whelan to introduce the PA SAVIN system. Along with area victim advocacy groups, Green described the system as a breakthrough for victims of crime.

With more than 1,600 inmates incarcerated in Delaware County, Green said at least as many victims have an interest in knowing the status of their offender.

"We work with victims and victim advocacy groups every day, and this notification system will help victims be more proactive and more empowered to ensure their own safety," said Green. "This really enhances the counseling and outreach that victim advocates, such as Women Against Rape and the Domestic Abuse Project, already make available."

Ferrell and her family learned Payne had been freed on bail only after he violated his parole and visited a Philadelphia nightclub in April, she said.

"That's how we found out that he was released. Nobody told us," said Ferrell. "With this program, I'm not going to have to wonder. I'm going to know."

Whelan lauded Ferrell's courage in speaking at the morning press conference. He said crime victims deserve all the help and support the county can give them.

"This system will help (victims) be in control, to be proactive in protecting themselves, instead of perpetuating the cycle of victimization," Whelan said.

With 61 of 67 counties in the commonwealth now plugged into PA SAVIN, a similar system for state prisons could be expected as soon as Feb. 22, a county council press release stated.

Kentucky-based technology company Appriss created the program in 1994 after 21-year-old Mary Byron was killed by a violent ex-boyfriend. Her boyfriend was released from jail on rape charges without her knowledge, the press release stated.

The notification system is a joint project between the Pennsylvania District Attorney Institute and the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency. It was paid for by a \$1.25 million grant from the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance. Pennsylvania was one of 13 states to receive funding from the federal government for the system, the press release said.

Donna Mellon, the county prison's assistant superintendent, said offenders are registered into the PA SAVIN system as soon as the intake process is completed upon incarceration. Victims are able to register after the offender's intake process is complete.

Suspects are not registered into PA SAVIN after an arrest, officials said.

The free, 24-hour service is available via automated phone system, live operator or Internet. Victims, family members and community residents can register with PA SAVIN and be notified of the offender's release, transfer or escape from most county prisons in the commonwealth, Green said.

Victims who register will be notified up to 24 hours prior to the offender's release, the press release stated. Victims who register to receive notifications remain anonymous, said Andrea Warner of the Pennsylvania District Attorneys Institute.

The automated phone system prompts victims for a personal identification number in order to receive the notice, she said.

For more information or to register, visit www.pacrimevictims.state.pa.us or call 866-972-7284.

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