

Tioga County joins Pa. victims' alert network

Program designed to protect people from retaliation by released, escaped criminals.

By George Osgood
Star-Gazette Wellsboro Bureau

WELLSBORO -- Crime victims -- and anyone else, for that matter -- can check on the status of county prison inmates in a brand-new notification program sweeping across the state.

Tioga County on Tuesday became the 10th Pennsylvania County to implement a program known as PA SAVIN. That stands for Pennsylvania Statewide Automated Victim Information and Notification. Designed to protect victims of crimes from retaliation, it allows residents to check the incarceration status of inmates. Tioga is the first Northern Tier county to start the program. Bradford County commissioners have approved PA SAVIN for their county, too, and officials there plan to roll it out in the next several weeks.

Tioga County District Attorney George W. Wheeler said, "PA SAVIN will provide notification to crime victims and other interested parties on an immediate and confidential basis. The program will be another tool to help increase the safety of crime victims.

"My office is proud to be part of this collaborative effort with the Pennsylvania District Attorney's Institute, the state, local victim advocates, our jail personnel and law enforcement to provide victims, their families and our communities an important empowerment tool in the fight against crime," Wheeler said.

PA SAVIN is patterned after that in a number of other states, including New York where the Office of Victim Services oversees a program called Victim Information and Notification Everyday -- VINE.

Wheeler rolled out the program at a meeting Tuesday afternoon that brought together state and local police, the Tioga County commissioners, advocates in the prevention of domestic violence, court officials and jail personnel. Pennsylvania is one of 13 states to receive funding from the Bureau of Justice Assistance to launch a statewide program.

Workers at county jails (and, in the future, state prisons) enter changes in prisoners -- released, escaped, transferred -- in a online database and people who have registered for updates on a particular prisoner are within 15 minutes of a status change.

Participants can leave phone numbers, e-mail addresses or both for notification, as well as a personal identification number or "PIN" to assure confidentiality. Offenders will not know who has registered for status checks. If a participant is not home when a prisoner's status changes, the service will leave a message on an answering

machine. If there is no answer, the service will keep calling for 24 to 72 hours or until the participant enters the PIN.

Live telephone operators assist victims who need help obtaining offender information or registering for notification.

"The goal is to have all 63 Pennsylvania counties with county prisons in the system by October 2008," Wheeler said. "It really is a step forward."

Andrea Warner, SAVIN project manager for the Pennsylvania District Attorneys Institute, demonstrated the program for those at Tuesday's meeting. She and Wheeler stressed that registration for notification was open to anyone -- not just crime victims.

Ralph C. Youmans, warden of the Tioga County Prison in Charleston Township, said correction officers there began logging inmate status changes on Feb. 1.

"This provides an extra margin of safety," said Reva Baldwin, Tioga County's victim-witness coordinator. "Before, they had to wait to be notified. The nice thing is, anyone can register to be notified.

"Victims of crime, especially, need to be notified when a perpetrator is released, so they can protect themselves," said Baldwin, who will circulate registration information among law enforcement agencies and district courts.

"Having PA SAVIN in Tioga County will allow victims and their loved ones the safety and security of knowing they have 24-hour access to the status of the offender in their case," she said. "This program will allow crime victims to take appropriate safety measures to keep themselves and their loved ones safe."