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## Victims notified of jail releases

*Nashville-area counties will use alert system to let public monitor offenders*

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Long before the cell door opens for a jailed offender in Davidson County, his victims know he is being released.

An automated system to notify those touched by crime has been in place for more than a decade in Nashville and Shelby County. Smaller county jailers have long done it the old-fashioned way, relying on a booking officer to make the call as a prisoner exits the building and hoping someone picks up the phone.

But Dickson, Robertson, Sumner and Wilson county sheriff's departments are among the agencies where an automated system will start up in the next 12 months, funded through a state coalition that advocates against violence. The federal Statewide Automated Victim Information Notification grant will pay to hook up at least 45 counties to the system this year.

"We've had people who have gotten out of jail, and not two hours later, we arrest one back at his ex-wife's house threatening her. We've had them beat people up," said Dickson County Sheriff Tom Wall. "Luckily here, we haven't had anything tragic happen, but I guess we've probably just been lucky."

Wall said they've done the best they could, but the phone numbers they get from the courts are often outdated or nobody answers the phone. The automated system, called Victim Information and Notification Everyday, calls continually until a person is reached, and registered users can call live operators or check the information and notification Web site to check if a person is still jailed.

### **5,500 in Metro program**

Family members, victims or concerned residents will be able to register up to five phone numbers to ensure they are told if the prisoner is scheduled for release, moves to a different facility or escapes from custody. Registration for the service is free.

The system is operating in at least 42 states in some capacity, and a statewide system is in place in about half of those states.

"We think this is really important for all victims of crime, for their safety," said Kathy Walsh, executive director of the Tennessee Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence. "To know when that offender gets out of jail gives victims of crime a sense of security."

The goal, Walsh said, is to eventually have a statewide system for every county. The cost will run about \$600,000 for the whole state, and Walsh said they hope within three years, the General Assembly will take over the cost of operation.

About 5,500 people in Metro registered to get phone, mail or e-mail notification last year, according to Appriss Inc., which operates the program.

The Davidson County Sheriff's Department pays about \$50,000 annually for the operation of its system.

"That's definitely a savings in the long run than having a paid person sitting there," said Karla Crocker, spokeswoman for the Davidson County Sheriff's Office. "I also think there's a peace of mind when people can register themselves and keep track of someone that has in some way made them a victim."