

Victim-notification system marks 15 years

By [Jessie Halladay](#), USA TODAY



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Mary Byron was killed in 1993 by an ex-boyfriend who had raped her weeks earlier. Her murder led to an alert system.

When Mary Byron walked out to her car in the parking lot of the Mall St. Matthews on Dec. 6, 1993, she had no idea that the man who had been arrested for raping her was out of jail and waiting to kill her.

Donavan Harris had posted bond and traded a hunting rifle for a 9mm handgun. Court records say he ambushed and murdered Byron as she warmed up her car to head home and celebrate her 21st birthday.

Byron's death led to Kentucky's Victim Information and Notification Everyday (VINE) system, which alerts crime victims when their offender is being released, paroled or moved to another facility.

The system, 15 years old this month, has spread to 46 other states, with Connecticut and New Mexico launching this year, according to spokeswoman Jennifer Recktenwald of Appriss Inc., which owns and operates the service.

Most states pay for the program through federal grant money, though some states contribute, she said.

"It's really, really helped people," said Ed Wutzer, VINE program director for the New York State Sheriffs' Association. "What they've been able to do is to blend technology into the criminal justice system in a way that helps crime victims."

The service allows victims to make a toll-free phone call or go online at www.vineline.com to check an offender's information. Users also can register to be notified by phone or e-mail, and in the coming months by text message, if an offender's custody status changes.

The program has expanded to include 2,600 communities. It's statewide in 40 states and in some communities in seven others. Kansas, South Dakota and Maine are the only states where it is not being used, Recktenwald said.

Debra Puglisi Sharp knows the man who killed her husband, raped her and held her hostage for five days in Delaware should never get out of prison after receiving 10 life sentences. But she said she takes nothing for granted and VINE provides security.

"I don't have complete faith in the judicial system," Puglisi Sharp said. "I need to know exactly where he is."

Denise Vazquez Troutman, director of the Center for Women and Families, said VINE is an important part of safety plans for women who are trying to get away from abusers.

Pat Byron, Mary's mother, said she doesn't call the system regularly since her daughter's murderer was sentenced to life in prison. But VINE gives her comfort.

"I can always check up if I want to," she said, "and that's the peace of mind that it gives everybody."
Halladay reports for The Courier-Journal in Louisville.