



Vermont launches victim notification

By Terri Hallenbeck, Free Press Staff Writer • August 19, 2009

MONTPELIER -- When the man who attacked her in 1992 gets out of prison, Susan Russell wants to know. She wants everyone in town to know and help her be on the lookout.

ADVERTISEMENT

Russell feels like she has a better chance of having that information with a new automated notification system that state officials announced Tuesday. Victims -- or anyone else who wants to track an offender -- can sign up to receive immediate word when an offender moves to another prison or is released.

"It means I'm going to get notified in a timely manner so I can put my support plan in place," said Russell, who helped state officials establish the new system.

Crime victims have been asking for more timely information, said Amy Holloway, director of the state Corrections Department's victims' services.

A 24-hour automated system run by a company in Kentucky will send out an alert via e-mail, phone or mail -- whichever method one chooses, Holloway said. Information does not include where an offender will live after release, nor does the system follow an offender once he or she is no longer in Corrections' custody. Forty other states use such a system, which has been funded with a \$400,000 federal grant, she said. Starting next year, it will cost the state \$50,000 a year for the service, she said.

The state is sending letters to about 2,050 victims it has on file to inform them of the new service and encourage them to sign up, Holloway said.

Information on an offender's location was already available to the public through the Department of Corrections' Web site, but the new system will be more immediate, Holloway said. Victims are required to be notified if they choose an offenders' impending release, but Russell noted it hasn't always been done as quickly as it should have been.

Russell said she was notified of parole board hearings for the offender in her case but not always within the required 30 days.

"We get a lot of complaints from victims who don't get notified," said Judy Rex, executive director of the state's Center for Crime Victim Services. "Corrections acknowledged the system was flawed." Rex said the new system should solve most of the problem, though one gap is that it won't be able to track offenders who were arrested but were released on bail.

Contact Terri Hallenbeck at 651-4887 or thallenb@bfp.burlingtonfreepress.com.