

Pilot program provides fast info to domestic violence victims

By RACHEL PARKER - LOG CABIN STAFF WRITER

When a victim of domestic violence files for an order of protection, the waiting begins.

Upon being served with the order, the respondent could react violently. Frightened victims often call the police several times to find out if the order has been served.

Faulkner County has been selected to pilot a new computerized system that is expected to benefit victims of domestic violence, victim advocates and law enforcement. Faulkner County and Conway officers, employees of the prosecutor's office and the Women's Shelter of Central Arkansas attended a training session Wednesday on VINE Protective Order, the system that will make information available 24 hours a day to victims, law enforcement and victim advocates. Others affected by the domestic violence may also register for notification.

The system is not to be confused with VINE, a system that notifies crime victims and their families when an offender is released from custody. Steve Adams of Appriss, a company that provides technology solutions for government agencies, said there are five types of notification. VINE Protective Order will notify the victim by telephone when: A temporary order is served, a permanent order is issued, a permanent order is served, a hearing date is changed and a permanent order expires.

The automated system will call the victim every 30 minutes for up to 24 hours until the victim answers the call and enters a PIN number. The victim may also call the toll free number at any time for information.

Faulkner County Sheriff's deputies and Conway Police officers may also access information about orders of protection while in the field by radioing their dispatcher, who will locate the information quickly on the computer.

Also, circuit judges will be able to access the system from the courtroom. Charlotte Garrett, victim services coordinator for the prosecuting attorney's office, said this means better protection for victims. For example, a temporary order of protection expires the date of the respondent's hearing. If the respondent misses the hearing because he was not served, the date will be reset, and the temporary order will be extended, she said. Under the current system, it could be the end of the day before someone is able to take the paperwork to the sheriff's office, Garrett said. With VINE Protective Order, because the judge can enter the information from his computer in the courtroom, police will immediately know that the order was extended.

Travis Fritsch of the Mary Byron Foundation explained VINE (Victim Information and Notification Everyday) came in the aftermath of Mary Byron's death. Mary Byron was a Kentucky hairdresser who was raped, assaulted and stalked by her former boyfriend in late 1993. The boyfriend was arrested for his crimes, but he made bond and was released. No one told Mary of her assailant's release. On Mary's 21st birthday, her former boyfriend shot her to death as she sat in her car outside her workplace.

The Mary Byron Foundation is a public grant-making charity based in Louisville, Ky., that funds programs focused on stopping domestic violence. A year after the murder, Jefferson County, Ky., where Mary Byron lived, became the first community to institute VINE. The foundation is partnering with Appriss to pilot VINE Protective Order. Funding was made possible by a grant to the Mary Byron Foundation from the U.S. Department of Justice Office on Violence Against Women, Fritsch said.

The system will be tailored to fit the police agencies, and once it is ready, it will be launched. Saline County has been testing the system since October, Fritsch said, and now Faulkner and Pope Counties are being asked to participate. "It cuts down on calls to police and victim advocates," she noted. "They are still there as backups, but the police can concentrate more on safety issues."

The only cost to the agencies now is the time for their employees to be trained and any expenses caused by changes in protocol. The rest will be provided by the Mary Byron Foundation for at least a year. After that, the agencies may look for other funding if the system proves to be a valuable tool, Fritsch said. "It can also generate reports so local officials know better who is being protected through this legal process," Fritsch added.

Garrett said, "When we got VINE it was such a benefit. We had one particularly violent case. He was let out on bond three times, and every time he re-offended." She pointed out the benefit of allowing anyone affected to register for notification. "Some (offenders) won't just punish the victim, they also punish Mom because she's the one who put (the victim) up to it."

Mary Spears, executive director of the Women's Shelter of Central Arkansas, said, "I'm just real excited, because I've sat with the victim all day by the phone saying 'Has he been served yet?'"

Fritsch applauded the involvement of Circuit Judge David Reynolds, who is in charge of domestic violence court.

"The court sets the tone for what is safety and justice in a community, and his commitment to work with us on developing this and tailoring it to Faulkner County is commendable. It will be invaluable to everyone throughout the whole justice and protection process. A lot of times you have the approval of judges, but to have that level of active involvement is commendable," she said.

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