

# Convicted felon's mistaken return to the streets discovered -- before things got ugly

By Rubén Rosario

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File the following in the already crammed and overflowing cabinet titled "a system is only as good as the people who use it."

Two weeks ago, one of convicted felon Victor Lee Bowen's numerous domestic abuse victims contacted the Washington County Jail.

She had learned through Minnesota's Victim Information and Notification Everyday (VINE) network that Bowen was to be released from the jail last Sunday for his latest transgression — a second-degree DWI conviction.

She also knew through the publicly accessible Minnesota Court Information System (MNCIS) that Bowen, 46, had been ordered to immediately begin serving a 180-day sentence on an order-of-protection violation in Chisago County involving another victim.

A complaint filed in the case stated that Bowen had told jail officials "he was going to kill the (victim)" after he allegedly made harassing phone calls to the 41-year-old woman.

There was no doubt about transporting Bowen after his stint was up at the Washington County Jail.

"Serve immediately upon release of Washington," states the online case summary sheet. Plain as day.

But when the victim called the jail, she was told there was nothing in the records indicating that Bowen would be turned over to Chisago County officials.

She then called the jail in Chisago County, which reassured her that — yes, indeed — there was a "hold" on Bowen.

Now comes Sunday, when the victim once again called the Washington County Jail and informed officials of the hold and was told again there was no hold.

"They told me that he (Bowen) was released to the streets," the victim told me Monday.

She then called Chisago County again. Again she was told that, no, there was indeed a hold on Bowen. She informed them he was free as a bird.

"Are you in a safe place?" she recalled the unidentified Chisago County Jail official asking her. When she replied in the affirmative, the man recommended she contact county prosecutors first thing Monday morning and have them issue an arrest warrant for a guy who should have never been let out.



Victor Lee Bowen  
Courtesy of Washington County  
Sheriff's Office

"Good luck," she remembers the jailer telling her.

"He was actually nice, and I don't believe he meant it in a funny way," said the victim, who asked me not to identify her because she still fears Bowen.

"But I was just stunned that the burden fell on me, the victim," she said. "The left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing, and in the meantime, this person has threatened victims and police before and could pose a safety risk to people."

#### LONG RAP SHEET

The victim in this case is 110 percent right, as Yogi Berra might say. Bowen, who has a lengthy criminal rap sheet, should have remained behind bars.

"We have found that the Chisago County's Sheriff's Office properly lodged its hold with the Washington County Jail for Victor Bowen," Chisago County Attorney Janet Reiter said Tuesday. She added Chisago County was expecting notification to pick Bowen up upon completion of his jail time.

"Whenever a prisoner is inadvertently released, all of law enforcement is concerned," added Reiter, who said her office issued an arrest warrant after I informed them of the foul-up.

It wasn't needed.

Bowen was picked up without incident late Monday afternoon at a relative's home in Wyoming, Minn. The pick-up by Wyoming police took place roughly 20 minutes after I informed Washington County Sheriff Bill Hutton of the screw-up.

Hutton, who became sheriff 3 1/2 years ago and was an Oakdale cop for 23 years, knows Bowen well. "Oh, yes, we've crossed paths many times," Hutton, said.

Bowen's record dates back more than 15 years and includes numerous arrests and convictions for domestic abuse, felony stalking and violations of orders of protection.

He was the subject six years ago of a \$500 reward posted by Crimestoppers after he failed to appear in court in Ramsey and Washington counties on outstanding domestic assault and felony stalking charges.

"Bowen has an extensive history of violent assaultive behavior toward women, especially those he has a relationship with and their children," the reward poster stated.

"In the past," it continued, "Bowen has made documented statements that he would not go back to jail alive and would attack any police officer or anyone else attempting to take him into custody."

In addition to his current woes, Bowen also was recently charged in a pending harassment case in Itasca County, in which a female complained to police that Bowen repeatedly called her.

#### VICTIM: 'NO CONCERN'

To his credit, I got little spin from Hutton. He manned up.

"Bottom line? We goofed," Hutton said.

The first misstep, Hutton explained, took place when a jail official erroneously entered nine days instead of nine months in confinement on Bowen's log sheet after he appeared April 7 in court for disposition of a probation violation in addition to the DWI charge.

The second mistake, Hutton noted, came last weekend when a jail supervisor in charge of reviewing state and federal criminal database records and approving releases did not check the MNCIS system as a final third step in the process.

Which, of course, led me to ask why no one heeded or took seriously the victim's warnings or reminders.

"You are right," Hutton said. "We are taking total responsibility. We book 7,500 to 10,000 people every year, which also means we also release close to that many, and this is the first time in my time here that something like this has happened.

"Thank you for letting us know about it," Hutton added. "Otherwise, this would have gone on undetected." Don't thank me. Thank the victim who got ahold of me about this. Still ...

"I find it interesting that when I, the victim, called, there was absolutely no reaction and the onus of getting a warrant was placed on my shoulders," said the victim. "There seemed to be no concern. But when a (newspaper columnist) called, they acted immediately. I think their attention to the victims and their priorities need to be much better than this."

Duly noted.

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