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Domestic violence council trying to make victims safer

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The Warren County Domestic Violence Council heard Wednesday about additions and changes to a program important to their work advocating for victims of domestic abuse.

Kristin Smith, program administrator of the Office of Victim Services in the Kentucky Justice and Public Safety Cabinet, was the guest speaker at Wednesday's quarterly meeting of the domestic violence council.

Smith helps administer the state's Victim Information and Notification Everyday service, a computer-based service for which people can register to receive notification of when an offender is in a county jail or state prison and other information.

A leg of the VINE service of particular importance to victims and their advocates is VINE Protective Order, a free telephone service that allows petitioners of emergency protective orders to learn about the status of their orders and gives reminders of upcoming hearings.

Smith said usage of that particular service has increased 59 percent over the past year, noting how important it is that the VPO notifies a petitioner within 15 minutes that a protective order has been served.

"VPO is, I think, critical and we want to encourage agencies as much as possible to use it," Smith said. "We know that (for victims) the first 48 hours are the most dangerous time once that respondent has been served."

The overall VINE service, which also notifies registered users when an offender is released, recently added a component allowing users to register for updates on any misdemeanor or felony case in the state.

"If you have a case you need to keep up with, we can send you a notification if there has been a schedule change or a location change and we can direct you to the circuit clerk's office for further information," Smith said.

In addition to phone notifications, people registered to VINE Courts can also receive notifications of schedule or venue changes in cases by e-mail.

Smith said that for people who register for VINE, the service helps provide timely updates to domestic violence victims and agencies that advocate for them.

The state is looking to provide additional services in the coming years, however.

Smith said her goals include adding a text messaging component so people registered to VPO and other services can receive notifications that way.

Also, Smith hopes to help organize what she called a Department of Corrections 101 training course in which members of nonprofit domestic violence advocacy agencies receive training in which they learn more about how

offenders sentenced to state prison terms can earn credit through good behavior and earning a GED.

That information can then be used to help keep victims updated on the status of an offender's sentence.

Nora Wright, chair of the domestic violence council, said it was important to stay informed in order to help encourage victims of domestic violence that someone is there to provide help.

"It's important that the community know our council members are united," Wright said.