

V#320 PA3

Computer-based victim assistance program coming soon

Staff report

TRENTON — A statewide computer-based victim assistance program, which provides 24/7 information and notification to crime victims and their families about the custody status of offenders in state and county jails is on track to be fully operational in New Jersey's 21 counties in January, Attorney General Peter C. Harvey said.

Harvey issued a formal directive to New Jersey prosecutors outlining victim rights and program guidelines, implementation and notification procedures.

New Jersey joins 36 other states across the nation in implementing the Victim Information and Notification Everyday Program. VINE provides crime victims and their families 24/7 access to offender custody and case information and automatically notifies the registered victim or family member about

any change in offender status, including the release from prison or jail. The implementation of New Jersey's VINE was coordinated by the Attorney General's Office, Division of Criminal Justice and the Office of Victim-Witness Advocacy.

Today, New Jersey nears full implementation of a very important program that gives crime victims and their families the information they need, when they need it," Harvey said. "New Jersey VINE is available in both English and Spanish, with live operator assistance for anyone contacting the toll-free information number at (877) VINE-4-NJ (846-3465).

Joining Harvey to announce New Jersey VINE were Assistant Attorney General Patricia Prezioso, director, Law Enforcement Services, Division of Criminal Justice, Sandra McGowan, Office of Victim Witness Advocacy, Jackie Simonson, Atlantic County VINE Program,

victim witness advocates and law enforcement personnel. The attorney general also acknowledged the commitment of New Jersey's 21 county prosecutors' offices and the more than 550 local, county and state police departments participation in the VINE Program.

According to Prezioso, the directive requires all New Jersey law enforcement to establish the VINE program and encourages all crime victims to participate by registering with local police. VINE begins when a crime is reported to police. The victims or family members provides telephone numbers and four-digit personal identification numbers to police. The contact information is included on the victim information forms provided to the county correctional facility when the offenders are committed to jail. The county correctional facility enters the victim information, including the telephone numbers and PIN, into a centralized computer, which registers the victims with VINE. When the county correctional facility releases or transfers offenders to other correctional facilities, VINE automatically notifies the victims by telephone, calling all the telephone numbers provided by the victim, at half-hour intervals. If the system is unable to contact the victim within 24 hours, a letter is sent to the victim by the county prosecutor's victim witness coordinator.

The New Jersey Division of Criminal Justice has implemented VINE in 19 counties with the remaining two counties, Bergen and Passaic, scheduled to roll out in January. VINE was funded via a \$617,000 federal Victims of Crime Act grant with no cost to the counties. To date, more than 7,200 victims have registered with VINE, including: Atlantic, 1233; Burlington, 445; Camden, 599; Cape May, 340; Cumberland, 325; Essex, 221; Gloucester, 250; Hudson, 155; Hunterdon, 55; Mercer, 215; Middlesex, 595; Monmouth, 197; Morris, 773; Ocean, 628; Salem, 121; Somerset, 85; Sussex, 46; Union, 927; and Warren, 24.

Victims registered with VINE will be notified automatically by the system of an offender's custody release or correctional system transfer. Registered victims can confirm an offender's status through a toll-free number — (877) VINE-4-NJ (846-3465), 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

For information about VINE, go to the Division of Criminal Justice Web site — Victim Witness — at www.njdcj.org.