

## Victim notification system goes online early

**Written by Jackie Schlotfeldt**

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The new, automated statewide booking system program recently installed at Socorro County's detention center came online sooner than what was originally projected.

The program – Victim Information and Notification Everyday or VINE – is an automated hotline available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The system provides vital information regarding the custody status of inmates, where they are incarcerated, if they have been released, parole eligibility dates, court dates and sentencing information.

Socorro Jail Administrator Evangel Maldonado said they received a call last week notifying them that they would be going online on Tuesday, March 2, instead of the original start date of late August or September.

"This is a benefit to New Mexico, period," Maldonado said.

Kevin Ann Cary, VINE program administrator from the Administrative Office of the District Attorneys, said in a March 4 telephone interview that Socorro came online quicker because the system installed was a new booking system rather than an old booking system that had to be interfaced.

"They (VINE) said all the information that was input into their booking system (from Socorro County) was fantastic and coming through very well," Cary said of the early start date. "Evangel and Tina (Padilla) are doing a great job."

The new notification program was made available through a two-year federal grant from the Bureau of Justice Assistance, Cary said before the county commission in February. She also informed the council their office has already applied for another two-year grant that, if awarded, would cover the cost of the program.

Although there is no cost to the county at this time, County Manager Delilah Walsh said if no further grant is awarded, they are prepared to budget for the program if necessary.

Capt. Tina Padilla, of the detention center, said eventually the system will be linked to the courts, as well as all the prisons in New Mexico and will allow them to access information on inmates incarcerated rather than waiting for a report to be made. Padilla further explained that the contracted provider for the VINE program, Appriss Inc., which is based in Louisville, Ky., updates information every 15 minutes.

"It is useful for anybody," Padilla said of the notification system.

The notification system is not only for victims of violent crimes, but for anyone who wants to know the status on an inmate including police officers and judges. Padilla said sometimes threats are made to officials and the notification system will let them know of any change in the status of an inmate.

Right now, notification will be made by telephone or e-mail, but Padilla said they are trying to implement text messaging as another avenue of notification, and they are also working on providing notification in Navajo language as well in New Mexico. But, until that is accomplished, a translator will be linked to the system to accommodate non-English speaking callers.

"People can register up to five telephone numbers," Padilla said for those who want notification. "Or, if a person is calling (the VINE hotline), a live person can assist them in helping locate where the person (they are inquiring about) is."

Cary said while the New Mexico Constitution lists 21 crimes victims have a right to be informed on, there are other crimes people can register to obtain information on as well.

"It's not limited to felony crimes," Cary said.

Another way to let victims know what information is available to them, Padilla said cards will also be made for police officers to hand out to victims as a first line of communication when arrests are made.

"I honestly think this will benefit the community and law enforcement," Padilla said.

Because notifying victims is their specific job at Appriss, Padilla said having this added measure as a means of notifying victims is really a process in eliminating human error when there are changes in an inmates status.

"Knowing they (victims) will be called makes us feel a little better when we let an inmate out of jail," Padilla said. "Anything that makes someone a little happier and able to sleep at night."

New Mexico is the 41st state to implement the program statewide.

The toll-free VINE number to call for more information on registering to be notified on the status of incarcerated individuals is 877-551-VINE (877-551-8463).

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