



New system keeps victims in the loop

By JAIME CONE / Reformer Staff

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BRATTLEBORO -- The Vermont Department of Corrections is spreading the word about its new automated victim notification system.

Dubbed VANS (Vermont Automated Notification System), the new service will provide victims with notification about offenders' release dates, when they have a parole hearing, and when they are moved to and from an out-of-state prison.

There are no restrictions on who is eligible to register for notification. It can be used by victims, their families, community members and law enforcement officers.

"One of the advantages is, if a particular individual has been threatening the community, the police department can register and get information about when that individual will be released and can keep an eye on (the offender's) usual haunts," said Amy Holloway, director of victim services for the Vermont Department of Corrections. "It's a really good tool for the community in general."

The system is being promoted as a more reliable way to keep people informed. It doesn't have the liability of human error, said Holloway, unlike the old system of notification.

That old system was started in the mid 1990s as a result of victim rights legislation that passed in the mid-1990s, said Holloway, and victim services, a branch of the Vermont Department of Corrections, was tasked with developing the system.

It relied on a variety of different agencies to place direct phone calls to victims and others.

"It was up to each individual (correctional) facility to flag it when there was a victim notification request," Holloway said.

Each caseworker was responsible for making sure a phone call or registered letter was sent out.

Donna Macomber, who works every day to provide support for battered women as the co-executive director of the Women's Crisis Center in Brattleboro, said the old system sometimes put victims of abuse at risk.

"It wasn't uncommon for a prisoner to be released and somebody would pull the file and see that they were supposed to give a seven-day notice," said Macomber. "They would call on the spot to cover themselves, but the woman would be given virtually no time to seek a relief from abuse order or to form any strategy or planning around the level of danger she might be in."

"It was based on human error -- or non-error -- and was very labor intensive and not effective," agreed Holloway.

There are numerous advantages to switching over to the automated system, said Holloway. The system will send a notification to the given telephone number or e-mail address, and the user may provide more than one.

The automated phone calls are placed once every two hours for 48 hours. It will leave messages on the answering machine and will tell victim services if it was connected or not. A four-digit personal identification number is required to let Victim Services know that the notification went to the intended recipient.

Because the user needs to choose their own PIN number, they need to sign up themselves, even if they had been registered for notification in the old system.

Every phone call ends by directing the recipient to a toll-free number with any questions or concerns, which can be addressed by a real person 24-hours a day, seven days a week.

If the user would like the message sent to a mailing address instead, the system will alert victim services, and an employee will send the notification in the form of a letter.

"We may even have text messaging one day," said Holloway.

People can register by placing a call to VAN's toll-free number, or they can register online. All they need to know, said Holloway, is the offender's first and last name.

It is completely confidential; the only people who have access the names in the system are victim services employees.

The system was launched last August after four years of development. According to Holloway, it cost \$50,000 a year to maintain, which is about the cost of keeping one offender in a correctional facility for a year in Vermont.

Macomber said she is not convinced that the automated system will be successful in replacing the old one when it comes to achieving the level of comfort that talking to an actual person provides.

"The system has never been perfect in notifying batterers," she admitted. "Our concern about the automated system is that it kind of dehumanizes it."

Macomber added that if victims change their phone number, it will make them impossible to reach if they forget to change their phone number on the registry.

She said that she foresees other problems as well.

She said she's concerned about the potential for post-traumatic stress caused when a woman returns home to find 15 answering machine messages regarding the offender's whereabouts.

It is possible for a user to customize the service by requesting that he or she not be notified about certain events.

Macomber said that in some cases, after receiving the message its difficult for victims to take the leap and call the toll free number with questions or concerns.

"There will be those for whom that additional step is a barrier," she said.

She added that the automated system may decrease opportunities for victims to connect with victims' advocates, who are able to provide a wealth of information regarding support groups and other resources.

Holloway said that she has found the opposite to be true; some victims, or family members of victims, have actually called the toll free number and are now receiving support when they never had it before.

"There are a lot of very serious crimes that were committed before the mid-1990's, and there was no notification then," she said. "In that respect, we've been able to offer support groups to homicide victims' family members."

"It's been really good, because people now have been able to get the kind of services they've been waiting for years," she added. "Some have been suffering by themselves, and we don't want them to feel that way." To sign up on VANS, call 1-866-976-8267, or visit www.vinelink.com.

Any questions or special notification needs can be addressed by calling the Department of Corrections Victim Services Program at 802-241-2302 or 802-241-2309.

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