



Wisconsin Department of Corrections VINE program marks 10 years of service

By John Lee • Post-Crescent Staff Writer • March 28, 2010

APPLETON — Pamela Brandon knows it's hard to prove a program prevented a crime, but she is confident a program that notifies victims when their assaulters are released from jail or prison has saved lives.

"In the scheme of things we know we have heard from people who have executed a safety plan, gotten out of harm's way, and in all probability we may have avoided a major homicide," she said.

Brandon, program manager for the WI-VINE program for the state Department of Corrections, made the comment Wednesday as officials observed the 10th anniversary of the VINE (Victim Information & Notification Everyday) program in Outagamie County, and the expansion to 41 counties in the state.

Outagamie and Dane counties and the state DOC have participated in the Kentucky-based program for nearly a decade, and a \$1.2 million SAVIN (State Automated Victim Information and Notification) grant from the state and U.S. departments of justice will allow that to expand to other counties that want to participate.

She said DOC is considering asking the state Legislature for the \$557,000 a year that will be needed to maintain the program statewide.

Victims in 47 states and more than 2,000 jails use the program. Congress has set a goal to establish a nationwide victim notification system, DOC said.

Outagamie County Sheriff Brad Gehring said the program has cost Outagamie \$17,000 a year, but the expense is worth it.

Last year, he said, there were 12,000 computer searches on VINE to check the status of inmates in the jail.

"It is a valuable resource for anyone impacted by crime," he said. "(It is) a simple, anonymous way to keep track of an offender."

Users can register an e-mail address and up to two telephone numbers, and be notified when the status or location of a jailed offender changes.

Police also use the system to locate people they are looking for, and the program is anonymous, accessible 24 hours a day, monitored, and has no fees or limits for users.

Brandon said the program monitors jail populations every 15 minutes.

Gehring and Stephanie Jens, the victim-witness coordinator for the district attorney's office, said knowing where offenders are is important to the victims.

"It is part of their healing process that they know when this individual is going to be released from custody," Gehring said.

Jens gives brochures on the program to victims, and uses the notifications as part of the victims' safety plans. She said that helps not only victims of domestic abuse and sexual assault, but also helps victims of property crimes.

"They have a sense of security knowing when the offender is going to be released," Jens said.

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