

Idaho puts 24/7 victim alert in the works

Current law says that victims must be notified when an offender is released; state wants it to be automated

By Betsy Z. Russell - The Spokesman-Review

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Idaho already has a law requiring victims to be notified when an offender is released from prison, but the state is working on a new automated system to make that and other information available around the clock.

"I just want to help the victim — that's who I'm for," said Bruce Gordon, victim services coordinator for the Idaho Department of Correction. "I think society is just now understanding the amount of trauma that a victim actually goes through."

When the new system is fully in place, victims, family members or others will be able to register to receive phone calls when a particular offender is released, is transferred or escapes.

They'll also be able to pick up the phone or go on the Internet at any time to check the custody status of the inmate.

"She's going to wake up and call that toll-free number and know exactly where he's at," Gordon said.

The law simply requires state or local agencies to send victims a notification letter.

Idaho has obtained a federal Bureau of Justice Assistance grant for nearly \$1 million to set up a statewide Victim Information and Notification Everyday system. The state has had the system up and running for prisoners under the control of the state Department of Correction 2002, and two counties, Ada and Bannock, also have gotten grants to set up the systems.

But the new grant will allow all the county jails in the state to be linked into a single, statewide system, so victims, family members or others can track offenders as they're released or transferred among institutions.

The notification system already is operating in a majority of states, including Washington.

"We're No. 27," Gordon said. "Some states are just not there yet, but we are making progress. I actually foresee in the future, I believe the feds are going to make us all have notification. It's a very big push. That's why (the Bureau of Justice Assistance) is having the grant money."

Idaho was awarded the grant in August and received the money in December. The project kicked off in January, and nine county jails already are on the statewide system. Sheriffs from all of Idaho's counties have signed on to a memorandum of understanding to join the project; there's no cost to the counties to participate.

The system has proven popular so far for those seeking information on inmates in the state system, Gordon said. "We've just gotten tremendous response out of it. We wanted to share that."

There are some limitations — the system only reports on inmates under the control of Idaho Correction or the counties, for instance, not those jailed out of state. So when an Idaho inmate who was being housed in Texas escaped in January, Gordon was notified by Texas authorities and worked with local police to notify the victim.

Gordon unveiled the new system at the "Two Days in June" annual crime victim assistance conference in Boise on Thursday.