



TELEPHONE, WEB SERVICE PROVIDES PEACE OF MIND TO VICTIMS

By Bethany Krajelis, The Southern

CARBONDALE - Every night, a young girl makes a phone call.

She follows the prompt and types in an identification number. After an automated voice tells her the man who committed a crime against her remains behind bars, she can fall asleep with a sense of ease.

Stories like this are what make the Illinois Automated Victim Notification (AVN) System so rewarding, said Mike Bastien, the statewide program coordinator. The system, which includes a Web site and a telephone service, provides crime victims and the public two things -information and notification of offenders' custody and case status.

"It gives them a peace of mind," Bastien said. "It's a very important program."

Michelle Gibbs, victim advocate for Pope County, said she routinely signs up victims for the "wonderful program."

"It gives (victims) a sense of comfort," Gibbs said. "Knowing the location of their perpetrator and when he will be released can help them prepare."

State legislators approved the program in 1999, giving the Office of the Illinois Attorney General funding and sole responsibility to start the service. Bastien, who has worked at the AG's office since 1984, traveled across the state to county jails, circuit clerk and victim advocate offices to put the procedure in place.

Information about offenders is gathered from the Illinois Department of Corrections, Department of Human Services, Prisoner Review Board, county jails and circuit clerks' offices. Bastien said the data goes through the operations center of the system provider, Appriss, and is updated on a regular basis.

One of the most useful aspects of AVN is the automatic notification, Bastien said. For instance, if an offender is released, transferred or escapes from custody, the system puts out a call to anyone who registered for notification of that specific offender.

Bastien urges registered users to remember their pin number. The system will keep calling and leaving messages, every 30 minutes for up to two days, until a pin number is entered, he said.

Some form of AVN is provided in all but five states. Thousands of people are registered and even more have checked out the Web site, Bastien said, adding that the numbers keep increasing. In October, more than 23,000 incoming and outgoing calls were reported by the service.

Rachel Tally, the victim witness coordinator at the Union County State's Attorney's Office, said even though the jail's system is sometimes down, she has had great experiences with AVN.

After she explains the program to crime victims, Tally said, most are more than eager to sign up.

"They love it," she said of the registered users. "They can relax, rest easier at night and sleep better knowing their perpetrator is still in jail."

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For more information or to register for Illinois Automated Victim Notification System (AVN), visit www.vinelink.com or call 1-866-5-NOTIFY.

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