



DOC announces new system of alerts for prison emergencies

By STEVE HERMAN, Associated Press Writer

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — The state Department of Correction began an automated telephone service Wednesday to alert citizens of escapes and other emergencies at or near two dozen prisons throughout Indiana.

Commissioner J. David Donahue likened it to a "reverse 911" system, in which people may register at a toll-free telephone number and provide the ZIP codes of the prisons about which they want to be notified and the phone numbers they want called if an emergency occurs.

Federally funded through a grant from the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Alert Notification Service will continue calling for up to 12 hours until a person's phone, answering machine or voicemail is answered. Once the escapee has been recaptured or emergency resolved, a follow-up call also will be sent.

"When an offender is out of bounds, but still on the property, that's not an escape," Donahue said. "When they've left the secure perimeter without authorization, without proper escort, and we've verified that, then we recognize that we have an escape itself. ... Once that decision is made, then we'll immediately notify the community."

Indiana is only the second state to use the notification system, following neighboring Kentucky several years ago, said Rick Jones of Louisville-based Appriss Inc., which that developed the technology. It has been used only a few times there, but in those instances, it has worked well, he said.

"The beauty of it is it fosters relationships with communities, because they can be your eyes and ears. If they're aware of a situation or problem in the neighborhood, they in turn can contact you and let you know how to resolve the problem," Jones said.

The system also will be used for other emergencies such as tornadoes and train derailments that might affect neighborhoods near the prisons, Donahue said.

He said the program eventually could be expanded to include e-mail alerts.

"With technology, it wouldn't surprise me what we can do with this," Donahue said. "As technology is available and we learn what we can do, we'll bring that to bear in our agencies."

He said the system will be used for all security levels.

Randall Koester, Donahue's chief of staff, said normal privacy constraints would not necessarily apply to juvenile escapees.

"Once they commit some kind of action like an escape that makes it a matter of overriding public interest, then we can reveal some identifying information (name and description) about that person," he said.

Eds: People may register toll-free with the DOC at 1-866-949-2537.

On the Net: Department of Correction,
<http://www.in.gov/indcorrection>