

Convict tracking upgraded

System to speed up alerts for crime victims will be put into use statewide

By Mary Beth Schneider

mary.beth.schneider@indystar.com

Crime victims will be able to know at any time where their offenders are and just when they might be released from prison under a new automated notification system being implemented in Indiana.

Indiana will be the 26th state to have the system when it adopts the Statewide Automated Victim Information and Notification Service in April.

The system, which has been available in Indianapolis since 1997, also will be available in every county, to track inmates in local jail facilities, sometime in 2008.

Gov. Mitch Daniels, announcing the near-completion of the program in a news conference Friday in his Statehouse office, said the program is an "important step forward" in giving people a tool to protect themselves.

Under the program, anyone -- crime victims, families of inmates, police or any other person -- will be able to register either by phone or the Internet to be notified about an offender's placement, transfer, release, court or parole hearings or any other change.

While people already have been able to seek notification by mail, the new program will be computerized, with people notified by the method of their choice -- home phone, cell phone, office phone or e-mail.

Under "the present system . . . you have to be very patient," said Department of Correction Commissioner J. David Donahue. "You'll have a one-stop shop moving forward."

The service is available in Spanish and English, at no charge to users, and people can remain anonymous.

The legislature approved the program in 2005, and the state applied for a federal grant to help fund it. Congress has approved \$17 million for the program nationwide, including \$1.25 million to Indiana. The state is providing about \$950,000 in matching funds.

The state has hired Appriss, the Louisville, Ky., firm that also runs the system in every other state, to operate Indiana's system.

Indianapolis was among the first areas in the nation to begin using the service. In 2006, the city's system averaged more than 10,000 inquiries, with more than 20,000 telephone or e-mail notifications made by the system.

How it works

Understanding the Statewide Automated Victim Information and Notification Service:

- Starting sometime in April, users will be able to go online at www.vinelink.com and click on Indiana, or call a 24-hour automated hotline -- the phone number is not yet available -- to check on the status of an inmate.
- People will have the option of registering to receive automated notification via e-mail, telephone or TTD devices for the hearing-impaired to receive updates on an offender's location, release date or legal hearings.

- Each person who registers will choose a Personal Identification Number. The system will call them, and if there is no answer, the calls will continue every 30 minutes for 24 hours. If an answering machine answers, a message will be left, but the calls will continue every two hours for 24 hours. The calls are stopped by entering the PIN number. That is done to ensure that the person who registered gets the notification.
- The service is free and available in English or Spanish.
- The system already is available in Marion County, at (800) 278-8134, and in Hamilton County at (800) 247-1935.