



New System to Alert Public When Inmates are Released

AP

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) – April 10, 2007 – An automated system to notify victims and others when an inmate is released or escapes from a county jail will soon be implemented in Pennsylvania, starting in eight pilot counties.

The Statewide Automated Victim Information and Notification system will allow people to register for around-the-clock notice by phone call, letter or e-mail.

It will replace or complement individual county systems, and anyone can sign up for a notification – not just victims.

Philadelphia will be the first county, going live in June or July, followed by seven other test counties in August and September. The system will go statewide over the following year and a half.

"For the constituency we serve, I would say it's a lifesaving service, a potentially lifesaving service," said Judy Yupcavage of the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

Pennsylvania has more than 100 domestic-violence related homicides a year, and about 40,000 protection-from-abuse orders in place, Yupcavage said.

A \$1.25 million federal grant is paying to add Pennsylvania to the dozens of states that have contracted with Appriss Inc. of Louisville, Ky., to install and operate the system. Users can register online or by calling a toll-free phone number.

The system was developed following the 1993 death of Mary Byron, a Louisville woman killed by a former boyfriend she thought was behind bars.

Appriss gets updates from jails about every 15 minutes, and automatically phones everyone who is registered under a particular inmate's name, calling for 48 hours until contact is made. It also sends out letters and e-mail.

Appriss registered 1.03 million people across the country last year for automated notice regarding the custody or court status of defendants. It issued 836,000 notifications.

The company has put in safeguards to help prevent incidents such as ones in 2005 and 2006 in which victims received erroneous calls that an inmate had been released, said Appriss spokeswoman Jennifer Recktenwald.

Jennifer Storm, executive director of the Dauphin County Victim/Witness Assistance Program, said her agency plans to continue its own program of contacting victims after the new statewide system gets up and running. Storm's organization has about 150 victims on its notification list.

"Many times when we're doing Dauphin County Prison notifications, we're providing other services, like crisis intervention, supportive counseling, relocation if necessary," she said.

The new system will allow anyone to register – neighbors, police officers or relatives of victims, for instance.

"There's a whole lot of fear for a victim," said Lancaster County Prison Warden Vincent A. Guarini, whose staff currently calls or sends a notification letter to a victim about an inmate's release at least once a day. "This can be completely anonymous."

A similar system regarding state-prison inmates might also be converted to the Appriss system under a grant proposal being developed, said Carol Lavery, head of the state Office of Victim Advocate.

"We're truly trying to build something that will not only make the system uniform – and therefore much more user-friendly for victims across the state – but will potentially, particularly in the counties, make it more likely that victims will access the system," Lavery said.

Appriss said in February it was working on statewide notification systems in Wyoming, Idaho, Iowa and Indiana, which would expand its network to 27 states, along with hundreds of other individual jails.

The eight pilot counties are Allegheny, Chester, Cumberland, Dauphin, Erie, Lancaster, Lehigh and Philadelphia. Centre County previously installed a similar system, and Clinton County is in the final stages of implementing one, according to the Pennsylvania District Attorneys Institute.

ON THE NET:

Appriss Inc.: www.vinelink.com

(Copyright 2007 by The Associated Press. All Rights Reserved.)