

County adopts victim-notification program

By Lisa Thompson

More than a decade ago, a 21-year-old Kentucky woman was shot to death by a violent ex-boyfriend who had been released from prison without the woman's knowledge.

The death of Mary Byron inspired that state to create a system to let victims know when those who committed crimes against them are released from prison.

Crime victims in Erie County now enjoy the same protection.

The Erie County District Attorney's Office and the Crime Victim Center unveiled a new program Wednesday to notify crime victims of criminal offenders' release, parole, transfer or escape from county or state prisons.

Victims who register for the free service may receive the notification by phone, e-mail or mail.

Staying apprised of an offenders' status gives victims and their family and supporters "time to make informed decisions" and increases their sense of safety and security, said Beverly J. Horn, director of the Office of Victims' Services for the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency.

"We want to continue to empower victims and hopefully, make the criminal justice system more available to them," said District Attorney Brad Foulk.

The program, known as Pennsylvania Statewide Automated Victim Information and Notification, is a joint project of the Pennsylvania District Attorneys Institute and the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency.

Erie County is the second in the state to introduce the program.

Centre County introduced it two years ago. From May 2006 to April, there were more than 47,000 Internet searches inquiring about the status of particular Centre County inmates.

The program was funded in Erie County by a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Assistance.

The service is expected to be available in all 63 Pennsylvania counties with jails by October 2008.

Patti Starvaggi, a survivor of childhood sexual abuse who serves on the board of the Crime Victim Center, praised the program Wednesday.

"Victims will have some peace of mind knowing where offenders are and when they will be released," she said.

"This is one more step in offering safety to a person who has been violated."
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To register for the Pennsylvania Statewide Automated Victim Information and Notification system, crime victims or anyone else interested in an incarcerated Erie County offender's status may call 1-866-972-7284 or log onto www.pacrimevictims.state.pa.us.