



System spreads the word when offenders get out

It's now possible to get a phone call when a city jail inmate is released.

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It just got easier for crime victims in Roanoke to keep tabs on the offenders who harmed them.

The Roanoke City Jail on Thursday launched an automatic system designed to quickly notify registered users when a particular prisoner is released.

The Victim Information and Notification Everyday system, known as VINE, has expanded from the state prison system and gradually is becoming available at Virginia's local and regional jails.

"There's been a big gap in the system," said Del. William Fralin, R-Roanoke, who sponsored a bill, later signed into law, requiring that victims be notified when a suspect is released on bail if they request it. "Particularly in domestic situations, people haven't had very much time to cool down."

Those who register for the system, anonymously if they wish, can receive notification by phone or e-mail when a particular offender is released from jail, is transferred to another facility or escapes.

It "gives them peace of mind and makes them feel that they are safe," Roanoke Sheriff Octavia Johnson told a news conference on the steps of the downtown courthouse.

VINE was implemented in the prison system in 2000 and now has more than 26,000 registrations, said Wendy Hopp, victim services unit director for the Virginia Department of Corrections.

A \$1.25 million federal grant is paying to expand the program to the state's 74 jails.

In Southwest Virginia, the program is up and running at the Franklin County and Botetourt County jails and is soon to be implemented at the Roanoke County-Salem Jail. More than 20 jails in Virginia are using the system.

On Thursday, local law enforcement officials and professionals who work with victims of domestic violence expressed support for the system but cautioned that it isn't a panacea.

Roanoke Commonwealth's Attorney Donald Caldwell said the new system could help lighten the workload of his office's victim-witness coordinators, who focus mostly on notifying victims of serious violent crimes.

"What can look fairly harmless on paper ... that can be the time bomb that's ticking," the prosecutor said.

Pamela Gold, domestic violence specialist for the Roanoke Police Department, said she approved of the system but noted that about 25 percent of the victims she deals with don't have phones and many don't have Internet access, either.

Those who register for phone notification will receive automated phone calls that will repeat for up to 24 hours until someone answers and punches in a personal identification code.

But Rick Jones, a spokesman for Appriss, the company that provides the VINE service, noted that a victim could have several family members register to keep tabs on the same jail inmate.

Jones also said that VINE does not provide notification in cases where someone is taken to the magistrate's office and released on his own recognizance. The prisoner would have to be released from the custody of the jail for notification to occur.

Anyone, not just victims, may register to be notified about any inmate in prison or a jail that uses the VINE system. But Appriss designed the system to help victims and created it after a man was released from jail and killed a woman in 1993 in Louisville, Ky., where the company is headquartered.

To register, call (800) 467-4943 or visit www.vinelink.com.