

One Step Ahead

Government Technology Magazine , April 2002

<http://www.govtech.net/magazine/story.php?id=8016&issue=4:2002>

Noted businessman Victor Kiam once said that information is a negotiator's greatest weapon. The same is undoubtedly true for crime victims who live in fear that their assailants will strike them again the moment they are released from legal custody. This fear is far from irrational, particularly in cases of domestic violence, where it is not uncommon for someone to fall victim to a person they thought was still securely under lock and key.

But with knowledge comes power, and a unique information system called the V.I.N.E. service is now helping to give both victims and law enforcement a leg up in the battle against crime. VINE, which stands for Victim Information and Notification Everyday, is a fully automated notification system that lets registered users know almost immediately when there has been any change in the holding status of a particular offender. This information can be sent via telephone, e-mail, or even a pager, and is usually delivered within about 15 minutes of the change in status occurring.

Developed and operated by Appriss Intelligent Solutions Systems Inc., a Kentucky based technology company that specializes in automation systems, the program is fairly simple. Appriss installs a computer that monitors the booking system for a local enforcement agency, effectively noting any changes in inmate status. That information is then forwarded to the main control center in Louisville before being dispatched to the registered user. There is also a toll free number users can call at any time of the night or day to get information updates.

Previous to VINE crime victims would have to rely upon local law enforcement officials to let them know if a criminal has been released or moved to another institution, or to simply follow up on their own with phone calls or letters. With VINE a victim can be made aware an inmate is about to be free before that person can get from the jail to the street. As such, most agencies that use the system provide information about VINE to crime victims as a part of their daily procedure. VINE also provides a collection of pamphlets and Public Service Announcements with the package to help the police get the word out. It is still up to the individual to follow through and become a registered user.

It is a tall order to keep all of these changes straight and up to the minute, but one VINE appears up to taking on. "We handle about 8 million data records and another half million phone calls a month," says Mike Davis, President and co-founder of Appriss. "We are automated, but we also have a staff here 24 hours a day, seven days a week to answer incoming phone calls."

VINE is the direct result of one data record in particular. In December of 1993 Mary Byron had already endured being kidnapped and raped at gunpoint by her estranged boyfriend, and thought he was still being held in jail to face charges for those crimes. But just three weeks after that horrible event the young man was released on bond. He found Byron sitting in her car after work, the balloons from a party her co-workers had thrown for her 21st birthday that day still beside her in the front seat, and shot her six times at point blank range. She never even knew he was free to seek her out again.

The ensuing public outcry for a better way to keep crime victims informed led to Davis and Appriss co-founder Yung Nguyen to create VINE, which debuted in Jefferson County, Kentucky in 1995. It has since grown to being used in 1400 communities in 38 states across the nation.

“Fully 50 percent of the offenders in the United States are being tracked by us,” says Davis. “There are 14 states that uses VINE statewide, with another 24 who have various counties who are in the program.”

It doesn't stop there. The Federal government also has come on board with the FBI, U.S. Attorney's office, and the federal prison system all utilizing VINE to track prisoner movement and status changes.

The basic VINE information informs the registered user of the release, escape, transfer, or death of an inmate. Sentence expiration date is also available, as is referral information for additional victim's services. All of this is offered in any language that can be scripted and recorded. The program can also be expanded to include live operator assistance, court information, and arrest notification. If a user has chosen to be notified by phone, VINE's automated notification calls continue for a 24-hour period, or until a successful connection is verified with the user's Personal Identification Number.

That around the clock capability is what sets VINE apart from older, paper-based systems.

“Automation really simplifies the process,” says Washington-based victim's rights advocate Anne Seymour. “A paper system simply does not allow for 24-7 notification. The automation really does allow for a much greater level of cost effectiveness. It truly is one of the greatest things since sliced bread.”

While VINE is a free service to registered users, it will vary by community size in the cost of implementing the system. The price tag for getting on board can range from \$200 to \$200,000 annually, with the obvious high end located in the large metropolitan areas such as New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. A typical small market example can be found in Ada County, Idaho, which spent approximately \$17,500 to start up the program and allocates another \$30,000 annually to run it. Ada County, which includes the city of Boise, did purchase an upgrade program with live operators for both English and Spanish speaking users.

That cost factor undoubtedly has an effect on whether or not a community chooses to use VINE, although the intangible benefits may not be accountable in terms of dollars and cents.

“If our system saves even one life,” says Lawson Brown, the Vice President of Marketing for Appriss, “Then it is worth every penny.”

There is also some help for local agencies from the federal government. Because every state in the union has some form of law requiring victim notification of inmate status changes, most states use some form of federal dollars to help offset the system’s costs.

“Most law agencies will tell you that some of the highest murder statistics come out of cases of domestic violence,” adds Davis. “Anything that allows a potential victim to know beforehand that a person is going to be released is a tremendous benefit to both that person and the community.”

While prices vary by size, Davis assures users that equality of coverage does not.

“Some of our users are very small rural counties,” says Davis. “But it does not matter. A small community in Nebraska will get the same kind of service as they do in New York City.”

Captain Roy Holloway of the Ada County Sheriff’s office is one person who will attest to that. Ada County has been using VINE since last December with what Holloway calls “very positive results.” He speaks very highly of Appriss and their commitment to the overall effectiveness of the program.

“I think this is a really good system,” Holloway states. “Appriss has been very responsive and they have done everything they said they would do. It is very comforting to have something like this in place.”

Rick Jones, Manager of Corporate Communication for Appriss, says there was some initial resistance to the program from some law enforcement people fearful that the program would double their workloads, or worse, automate them out of a job.

“A lot of people thought they were going to have to do double duty inputting all of this information into a separate computer system,” he says. “That didn’t last long. Once they discovered that it was just a computer in the corner they didn’t even have to look at, they were okay.”

It also helped for law enforcement personnel to realize they too can benefit personally from the system.

“Police officers, judges, and lawyers get threatened all the time,” says Anne Seymour. “Now they realize that they can also register and be notified of these changes for their own safety.”

Perhaps the major benefit to the VINE system is that users have only one number to call to get this kind of information rather than negotiating their way through the normal maze of agencies and offices to find out what they need to know. It is also a tremendous blessing to those agencies and offices as well, since they are subsequently freed from being flooded with those calls.

While VINE appears to be the best option out there for people who wish to keep up with the movements of dangerous felons, it is worthy to note that, as with all technology, there is still a degree of fallibility to consider. Carol Taverna, a Victims Advocate for the Domestic Violence Unit of the Sacramento County District Attorney’s Office, says that she has heard of two instances where an inmate was freed without the victim being notified beforehand. To date neither occurrence has resulted in further crimes being committed against the registered users by those convicted felons.

“I always suggest VINE to victims because it is still better than anything else we have. Before VINE victims had to call the actual jail where someone was being held if they wanted this kind of information. But if it is really going to work then it needs to work one hundred percent of the time.”

Human errors, such as delays or omissions in inputting release information at the jail site, do make VINE as vulnerable to the garbage-in/garbage-out syndrome as any other technology. But Captain Holloway says there are a number of safety valves built into the system that make it as close to failsafe as possible.

“The only complaints I have seen so far have come from people who registered with only a non-direct work telephone number. Because the notification system is automated, the person answering the phone did not know what to make of the call. Since the system is designed to keep calling until it gets a confirmation Personal Identification Number, it continued to call without the user being made aware.”

Holloway stresses the importance of users supplying accurate information right from the start, but he says it is also possible for users to alter or add to that information at any time. There are emergency options in place for such scenarios as power failures and system shut downs, and the system even allows for the agency to follow up on complaints by getting the details of notification calls, and to verify when a call went out and if the PIN was given out.

On all fronts VINE appears to be just what it is advertised as – a very cost effective and efficient way for law enforcement to provide a necessary service to the public. And while nobody will ever claim that any system is totally foolproof, when compared to the alternatives there really is no comparison at all.