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# Letting Victims Track Tormentors

By Sean Scully/Philadelphia

For a long time, Christine Sharpless found it hard to sleep and almost impossible to relax. An ex-boyfriend, in jail for abusing her, had assaulted her after being sent out on work release with no notice to her. Every strange creak in the night frightened her. Then she won some relief. At least once a week, she would log onto her computer to make sure her abusive partner was still in jail. And she knew that should he be released or even escape, she'd get an automatic phone call within minutes, alerting her that he was out on the street.

Sharpless, 40, a homemaker from Centre County, Pennsylvania, was using what's known as SAVIN — the Statewide Automated Victim Information Network — an increasingly widespread system designed to alert crime victims when an inmate hits the streets or is transferred to another facility. "You don't have to wonder all the time if you're going to run into him in the grocery store," says Sharpless. "You don't have to lie awake at night wondering if your doors and windows are locked."

Some version of SAVIN is in use in 34 states. Philadelphia became the latest big city to come on line this month, when it linked into Pennsylvania's still-developing network, which started with a local system in Centre County in 2004. "I think it makes victims feel and witnesses feel that they have some knowledge and don't have to go through a third party or wait for someone to call them up" to get information on inmates, says Philadelphia District Attorney Lynn Abraham. "It's like a failsafe," says Bob Eskind, spokesman for the Philadelphia Prison System, which houses 9,200 inmates and processes 100 or more in and out every day. "It's certainly going to be faster. It's totally anonymous and free. It will give people information they need when they need it."

Under the SAVIN system, a jail or prison connects its inmate database with a central operation center of a Kentucky-based company called Appriss Inc., which developed and maintains the system. Crime victims register confidentially online or by phone to track a particular inmate and Appriss notifies them whenever the prisoner is released, transfers to a new facility, or manages to escape.

The system grew out of the 1993 murder of Mary Byron, who was gunned down in Louisville on her 21st birthday by an abusive boyfriend. He had been released from jail, but somehow the authorities had failed to warn Byron. The resulting public outcry led local officials to develop the first automated victim notification system, which has spread nationwide. Appriss now gets notification of up to 400,000 prisoner releases or transfers a month, spokesman Rick Jones said, and sends out up to 800,000 notifications by phone and another 100,000 by email.

Backers of SAVIN, including the federal Department of Justice, have ambitious plans for the system. The same technology could eventually be used to deliver nationwide updates about protective orders and court hearings. It could even allow victims of domestic violence to learn if their abusers have illegally attempted to buy firearms while under protective orders. The system is the latest in a series of technology-based systems to keep closer tabs on criminal behavior, from home monitoring bracelets and sex offender registries to cameras on street corners, says Washington State University Criminology Professor Travis Pratt, who conducted a review of his own state's program two years ago.

As with any new law enforcement technology, there are unintended consequences for the system. For example, Pratt said, during his research he turned up hints that law enforcement officers are using the system not to protect victims but to keep track of non-violent repeat criminals. He also heard stories that gang members were registering with the system in order to watch the movements of rivals. "I don't want to downplay the benefits of it, because certainly good things come from it," he says, "But we have this weird perception in this country that if it is a new technology and it must be great and no problems can come from it."

Officials say they are not worried about SAVIN being used for nefarious purposes. It is possible, Appriss's Jones said, to manually block or delay notifications if there is some reason why an inmate might be in danger if news of his release were to spread.

Right now, the problem for Christine Sharpless is that the system isn't universal. While she once depended on SAVIN's grace for her peace of mind, she has recently had to learn to live without it. Late last year, her abuser was sent to a state prison that won't connect to the SAVIN system until at least 2009. "At least I know he's there, everybody's doing their best to keep him in custody," she said, but "If they had the [SAVIN] system... that would be even better."

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