

Essex County Sheriff's Department Launches Online Victim Notification

Under the direction of Sheriff Frank G. Cousins, Jr., the Essex County Sheriff's Department has implemented a state of the art online victim notification system, known as VINE (Victim Information and Notification Everyday). VINELink is the online version of VINE, the National Victim Notification Network. This service allows victims to obtain timely and reliable information about the custody status of offenders 24 hours a day. Currently, the Massachusetts Department of Corrections utilizes VINE, but Essex County will be the first sheriff's department in the state to offer such a program to victims of crime.

VINE communicates with jail and prison booking systems in near real-time, transmitting updated information to the network, which then triggers victim notifications.

VINE will be utilized by Essex County in two ways. First, it will enhance the victim notification process. In addition to standard phone calls and mail, a certified victim will receive vital information by way of email, text, phone, mobile application and TTY for the hearing impaired. Second, it will enhance public access to specific inmate information. By logging onto the VINE website or calling a toll-free phone number, the public will be able to receive inmate status, facility information, inmate number and projected release date.

Sheriff Cousins spoke on the importance of this system: "Victim notification is extremely importance to us. VINE will allow us to reach out to victims in a number of different ways. In addition, the VINE technology means more convenient access to limited information to the public. We will be providing better public service while maintaining the appropriate levels of confidentiality for those in our custody."

As part of their preparation to use the VINE system, ECSO staff met with batterer's intervention program staff, victim services agencies, police, probation and parole officers and the District Attorney's Office. "We wanted to get input from all of the stakeholders in the process" Sheriff Cousins explained.

Crime victims, their families, victim advocates, and law enforcement officials use the VINE system to obtain information. Users can register to be notified by phone, email, and/or text if the custody status of an offender changes. Over 700,000 notification calls are made each month and Registration and calls are anonymous and free. Live operators are available 24/7/365 to assist with inbound calls and registration. The call staff has had sensitivity training, and translators are available.

VINE includes 2,300 communities nationwide and also serves the US Department of Justice, including the FBI, the US Attorney Office, and the Federal Bureau of Prisons. Offenders who are monitored are those who are housed or handled by participating agencies, such as jails and prisons, and booked offenders.

To register or for more information, go to www.vinelink.com or call (877) 421-8463.