

TERI FIGUEROA - tfigueroa@nctimes.com | Posted: Sunday, August 16, 2009 9:20 pm |

A new program that allows crime victims and others to anonymously track the status of inmates in San Diego County jails appears to have been well-received in the six weeks it has been around.

Since officials flipped the on-switch for a service dubbed "VINELink" last month, more than 5,000 people have logged on and asked to be quietly notified when the particular inmate that they are curious about is getting out of jail or is transferred to prison.

VINELink ----VINE stands for Victim Information and Notification Everyday ---- is a nationwide service designed to let victims keep tabs on the whereabouts of inmates in the facilities linked up to the VINE network.

Locally, that means everybody in San Diego County's adult jails can be tracked.

The way the notification service works is simple. The victim ---- or a concerned neighbor or anyone, really ---- can call a toll-free number or click on a Web site and register to be notified by e-mail or phone call if a particular inmate is leaving jail. There is also notification through teletype, or TTY.

It's free and it's completely anonymous.

If the inmate gets out of jail ---- maybe he makes bail or the charges are dropped ---- the VINE link system notifies the crime victim immediately.

"This is a tangible way to help," said Cynthia Charlebois, the director of the Victims Assistance Division of the San Diego County District Attorney's office. "Crime victims can feel at ease and confident because they are going to know ahead of time that someone is going to get out of custody."

She said victims are surprised and pleased to learn about the tracking and notification system.

But a word of warning: The notification phone calls are computer-generated; the phone calls come at anytime, including 3 a.m. And if a victim chooses e-mail notification, the victim must be sure not to make a typo when inputting the e-mail address.

VINELink only recently grabbed a foothold throughout California. For a while, only 17 counties had ponied up the money for the service. But thanks to grant money funneled to the state's sheriff's association, the state's remaining 41 counties, including San Diego, are now on board.

"I really believe that this could be a great resource for people," said Rich Luczak, who headed up the project for the San Diego Sheriff's Department.

"The inmate has no idea and has no way of knowing who has registered to know about their whereabouts," he said. "This is totally for the victims."

In San Diego, inmates who are in the county jails, which are run by the Sheriff's Department, can easily be tracked while in custody. But if they head to state prison, VINELink does not track them, because the state prisons do not contract with VINELink for that service. Nor does the system track people in federal custody.

Appriss Inc., the company behind the service, said it made more than 1.2 million notifications in 2008.

Charlebois said registration can be done through VINELink's Web site or by calling. She said the toll-free number to register is 877-411-5588, and the TTY for the hearing impaired is 866-847-1298.

Call staff writer Teri Figueroa at 760-740-5442.