

November 1, 2019

RE: Illinois Automated Victim Notification (AVN) System - 2019 Status

Dear Honorable Members of the Illinois General Assembly:

The Crime Victim and Witness Notification Advisory Committee (AVN Committee) was created in 1999 to assist the Office of the Illinois Attorney General in the implementation of the Illinois Automated Victim Notification System (AVN system). [725 ILCS 120/8.5(g)]. The AVN Committee is charged with evaluating the operation of the system and reporting its activities and status to the General Assembly each year. As Chair of the AVN Committee, I am pleased to provide you with this update on the operation and enhancement of the Illinois AVN system.

The Illinois AVN System Basics

The Illinois Automated Victim Notification System provides information about changes in an offender's custodial status and court case status. Victims, witnesses, family members, law enforcement officers, probation officers, and interested members of the public can request bilingual (English/Spanish) telephone, email, or text notifications. The service is free to users and is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The Illinois AVN is a critical element in ensuring that law enforcement officials, the Department of Corrections (DOC), and prosecutors fulfill their constitutional and statutory mandates to notify victims of changes in an offender's custodial status and upcoming court dates. [See Article I, section 8.1 (a) of the Illinois Constitution, delineating the rights of crime victims, and the implementation legislation contained in the Rights of Crime Victims and Witnesses Act. [725 ILCS 120/4 and 4.5]. Law enforcement officers, prosecutors, and victim advocates are given, upon request, special access to the system (VINEWatch), affording them the opportunity to further assist victims.

The Illinois AVN system provides these valuable notifications via a computer interface with county jail booking systems, the Illinois Department of Corrections, circuit court clerks, and selected Department of Mental Health facilities throughout the state. The Illinois AVN system also receives information about sex offenders through an interface with a vendor that receives data from law enforcement agencies registering sex offenders. The AVN system transfers information from these sources to a centralized communication center, which in turn, generates timely telephone, email or text message updates to any individual who is a registered user of the system.

Presently, Eighty-seven jails, ninety-six court systems, the Illinois Department of Corrections, and seven facilities in the Illinois Department of Mental Health, participate in AVN.

The Illinois Department of Mental Health (DMH) is responsible for providing notifications related to offenders who have been found not guilty by reason of insanity or who have been found to be sexually violent or sexually dangerous persons. The notifications mandated by the Rights of Crime Victims and Witnesses Act [725 ILCS 120/4.5(d)(2)] include notices when offenders in DMH custody have been released to and returned from an off-grounds pass, and notice when an offender is conditionally released, dies, or escapes. DHS notifications are provided only to victims as specified by statute. County Sheriffs are required by the Sex Offender Community Notification Act to provide information to victims of registered sex offenders. These notifications relate to changes in the sex offender's residence or employment addresses, and when an offender fails to re-register with the appropriate law enforcement agency. [730 ILCS 152/120(a)].

The registration process for the Illinois AVN system is relatively simple. Victims, witnesses and other interested parties call a toll-free number: 1-866-5-NOTIFY (1-866-566-8439), (TTY-I-877-502-2423), or register online at www.vinelink.com (VINElink). A mobile phone application (VINEmobile) is also available to ensure community members are safe and informed with up-to-date offender status notifications on a 24 hour basis. Both the toll-free telephone registration as well as the email and text message notifications are available in English and Spanish

Users who register for phone notification are required to select a four-digit Personal Identification Number (PIN), which allows the Illinois AVN system to monitor when the intended recipient has received the requested notification. If the phone call goes unanswered or if the correct PIN is not entered at the time of the call, the system will continue to attempt to make notification, depending on the nature of the notification, for 24 hours. At any point in the process, users may connect to a live operator for assistance. All e-mail and text message notifications are sent exclusively to the email or phone number of the user's choice.

In addition, law enforcement officers, prosecutors, and victim advocates can request access to a restricted area of the AVN system. This restricted part of the system, referred to as "VINEWatch," allows criminal justice personnel and victim advocates to register victims, update registrations, run prepare statistical AVN usage reports, conduct emergency override procedures, and conduct offender and case searches.

Since its implementation in 2001, the Illinois AVN system has provided information to 1,267,075 registered users. Court and custody information have totaled 16,482,857 separate searches. As of October 2019, the Illinois AVN system can access custody information for 108,593 offenders and case status information for over 1,533,027 open criminal court cases. As of October 2019, the Illinois AVN System has 322,303 active, registered users. During fiscal year 2019, the system provided 1,010,334 telephonic notifications, 180,478 email notifications and 148,664 text message notifications. All of those notifications were secure and free-of-charge to the users. The law expressly prohibits the Office of the Attorney General from releasing names, addresses, phone numbers and email addresses of those who register with the AVN system, thereby ensuring the victim's anonymity and safety. [725 ILCS 120/8.5(h)]

As with any technology, improvements and upgrades are critical to maintain a robust system. Over the years, the Attorney General's Office utilized grant monies to: add a text messaging system in 2011, upgrade the interfaces to 29 county systems in 2012, added DHS to the system in 2012, VINEmobile was added in 2013 and a redesigned VINELink website was launched in September 2015.

On-going AVN Operational Costs

The operating costs for the current AVN system are disbursed from the Violent Crime Victims Assistance (VCVA) Fund. The Violent Crime Victims Assistance Act imposes a fine on persons convicted of criminal offenses and certain offenses listed in the Illinois Vehicle Code. These fines are deposited in the Violent Crime Victims Assistance Fund, which is used for the AVN system, and other victim service programs administered by the Office of the Illinois Attorney General, including grants to programs that provide direct services to victims of crime. [725 ILCS 240/1 et. seq.] A portion of the fees generated by sex offender registration are deposited into the Attorney General Sex Offender Awareness, Training, and Education Fund. This fund contributes to the maintenance costs associated with data related to sex offender notifications. The maintenance costs for the AVN service are continual, and are likely to increase in the future. The continued operation of the Illinois AVN system rests upon the solvency of the Violent Crime Victim Assistance Fund and the Attorney General Sex Offender Awareness, Training and Education Fund.

The Attorney General's Office is still assessing the fiscal impact of Public Act 100-897, which was signed on August 20, 2018, but contains an internal effective date of July 1, 2019. This law restructured the fines, fees, and costs assessed in criminal cases in Illinois, including the amounts deposited in the VCVA Fund. Public Act 100-897 will likely decrease the funds deposited in the VCVA Fund, as the law both eliminates certain fines that were assessed under the Clerks of Courts Act and also provides a means by which such fines can be waived or reduced for defendants. For the FY 2020 budget, the Office decreased its requested appropriation by 24.2 percent for the VCVA Fund compared to FY 2019 and has attempted to shift the operating costs of the VCVA Fund to other special funds.

The Attorney General's Office continues to monitor the fiscal impact of this law change, including the impact upon maintaining the AVN system. The current vendor for the AVN system is in the process of implementing a complete remodel of the system. Planned upgrades include better data security and functionality as well as additional features such as local directories of service providers, offender location information, contact lists of service providers, and interactive voice response. These planned system upgrades will cost approximately \$955,000. The Attorney General's Office continues to explore funding sources outside the VCVA funding stream to maintain the highest quality product and service to victims in Illinois.

Continued Benefits

The AVN system is a significant factor in insuring victim safety in an efficient and cost-effective manner. It has been a great success, as evidenced by the increase in the number of victims and citizens using the system. AVN serves as a valuable resource to assist law enforcement and prosecutors as they carry out their constitutional and statutory duties to notify victims of crime of changes in an offender's custody status, and remind registrants of upcoming court dates. The Attorney General's staff is dedicated to making the system technologically current, user friendly and well-managed.

To ensure the public awareness of this valuable service, staff from the Attorney General's Office provides training to agency users on the features and benefits included in the Illinois AVN system. Training and a fact sheets on VINE watch are available to law enforcement, prosecutors, and victim advocates and other interested parties throughout the state.

If the Members of the General Assembly have any questions about the Illinois AVN system, the new enhancements, or would like a demonstration on how this system effectively serves the victims and witnesses of violent crime in your district, please do not hesitate to contact Kathy Carroll at 312-814-3683 or Sharisse Kimbro at 312-814-1427 of the Attorney General's Office.

On behalf of the AVN Committee, we thank the Members of the General Assembly and Attorney General Raoul for providing this invaluable service to the citizens of Illinois.

Sincerely,

Sharisse Kimbro
Chief, Crime Victim Services Division