



September 29, 2009

Editorial: Notification system break through for victims

When the federal government comes knocking with grant money for start up programs, it is always wise for local government to exercise a combination of caution and skepticism.

One-time federal grants have a way of becoming permanent, ongoing expenditures with local taxpayers bearing the brunt of the cost.

However, a new crime notification system being rolled out in Winnebago County appears to have a positive cost to benefit ratio. The Wisconsin Department of Justice is using a \$1.2 million federal grant to create a computerized network that allows crime victims to be notified when the person who committed the crime is released from jail or moved to a different facility.

The Victim Information and Notification Everyday (VINE) system gives crime victims the ability to access information about criminals in custody and receive updates on their status via telephone, the Internet or by e-mail. The beauty of the system is the user-friendly adaptability of accessing the information.

To access the information and receive alerts, users must register with the system, either by phone or through the Internet, and specify whom they want to receive notifications about. Once they have completed registration, they will be notified by an automated service that will place a phone call or send an e-mail when the offender's status changes

The system is currently being used in Dane and Outagamie counties and will be expanded statewide. Winnebago County is joining the system in October. After the initial installation, it costs about \$17,000 annually for maintenance and software updates.

Installing the system makes sense on three counts. The up front costs, which are generally the most expensive, are covered by the Federal grant. Once activated, the system allows professional victim-witness advocates to spend more time on their core responsibility, working with crime victims before and during the judicial process.

Most importantly, it gives victims a sense of empowerment that are in control of information that about perpetrator. From a taxpayer perspective, the system is a cost effective way to answer the criticism that the rights of the victim are subordinate to the rights of the criminal in the judicial process.
