

Notifying and Informing Victims of Crime: An Evaluation
of North Carolina's SAVAN System



North Carolina Criminal Justice Analysis Center

Governor's Crime Commission

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Executive Summary

SAVAN, or Statewide Automated Victim Assistance & Notification, is a computer network created with the goal of providing knowledge of offender movement to victims of crime. Operational in 98 of the state's 100 counties, SAVAN has been assisting victims of crime for six years. It is available 24 hours a day and notifies victims anytime their respective offenders change location. Also, counties that provide SAVAN services can in turn offer any victim the ability to call the network for court dates. Victims can either call the network for offender information or register for immediate notification whenever the offender is moved.

In an effort to improve resource allocation, provide data for policy and program development and to provide the Crime Commission with feedback on its programs, the North Carolina Criminal Justice Analysis Center, which is the research and evaluation section of the Crime Commission, conducts process and impact evaluation studies. This report presents the findings of a process and impact evaluation of the SAVAN system. This SAVAN evaluation was conducted not only to receive information on network activity and usage but also in an effort to gather information concerning the process of establishing and maintaining the system; as well as to document the extent of its impact upon victims of crime, law enforcement and jail operations, and prosecutors' offices.

A 22-question survey, containing both process and impact sections, was developed and administered by mail with follow-up data collection by fax and phone queries. The survey instrument contained nine process questions, such as: "Are there any concerns/problems that you have about this network and the process of registration or notification?" These questions were aimed at exploring the SAVAN processes such as installation of the network, and the registration of victims. The next 13 questions dealt with the perceived impact of SAVAN on the victim, law enforcement agencies and prosecutors' offices. Questions such as: "What do you see as the most beneficial outcomes of the state SAVAN initiative," were included.

In an effort to elicit the impact of SAVAN on its primary users, i.e. victims who are currently registered with, and using, SAVAN, the Appriss company developed a client feedback telephone module containing both process and impact related questions. Randomly selected SAVAN users were asked a series of questions, via an electronic recorded message script, with their respective responses being stored in an automated database. Two distinct message scripts were generated; one for registered users who had received prior court notification calls and one for users who had received prior calls regarding offender movement within the jail/correctional system.

A total of 47 completed surveys were returned to Analysis Center staff with 29 responses being obtained from sheriffs' offices (29.6 %) and the remaining 18 being forwarded by the state's district attorneys (46.2%). This equates to a 34.3 percent return rate across the surveyed criminal justice agencies. Random phone calls were conducted until either 500 attempts were made or 50 completed surveys were obtained from registered users in the court notification group. The same procedure was used for those victims in the offender movement group. A total of 41 completed surveys were obtained for the court notification group with 42 being obtained for the offender movement group.

As part of the process evaluation component survey respondents were asked to rate the level of awareness, within their respective communities, of SAVAN and its role in the victim notification process. The majority of the respondents (58.7 %) noted that their respective community members possessed some awareness of the SAVAN system and its existence as a resource for crime victims. Slightly more than 28 percent reported a solid awareness with 6.5 percent noting a strong awareness of SAVAN. Only three respondents reported (6.5%) that their community residents had no awareness of the system. Thus, 93.5 percent of those responding to the survey felt that their community members had at least some level of awareness regarding SAVAN and its role within the criminal justice system.

Respondents were asked to delineate the most beneficial, and by contrast, the least beneficial aspects of the state's SAVAN system. A clear majority (65.1%) noted that the most beneficial feature of the system is the provision of information to victims regarding their specific court cases and the custody status, or location, of their respective offenders. Seven respondents (16.3%) suggested that the most beneficial aspect was that the system provided victims of crime with a greater sense of security with three respondents (7%) noting that SAVAN extends the level of protection afforded to its registered users. Other benefits included: improving victim involvement in the process and offering a more convenient and easier method for quickly obtaining relevant court and custody status information. Only one respondent offered a benefit that was not directly related to victims; i.e. the system is most beneficial for allowing the district attorneys' offices to carry out their mandate of notifying crime victims. Thus, overwhelmingly the respondents noted benefits which are directly related to the victims and their specific cases.

Conversely, the least beneficial aspects clustered in three response sets with seven (23.7%) respondents noting that SAVAN suffers from a lack of public awareness. This finding is contradictory with the survey participants' prior responses suggesting that further exploration may be needed in order to obtain a more accurate depiction of how well known SAVAN is among the general public. It may be indicative of a greater level of awareness among former registered users and others who have come into contact with the local criminal justice systems versus members of the general public who have not had direct contact with the courts.

Technical problems and existing gaps in the available information, such as a first continuance date and then a custody intake date without any data on the court trial date, were noted as problematic. Each of these deficiencies were noted by 13 percent of the responding sample. Overall, 24 (51.1%) of the 47 survey participants responded by offering at least one negative or least beneficial feature of the system.

As part of the survey participants were asked to rank SAVAN on a variety of process measures including the victim notification process, registration, SAVAN installation and maintenance, and fiscal management. Respondents were asked to rank 11 process factors on a 10 point Likert scale ranging from one (poor) to 10 (outstanding).

Overall, the respondents rated the process aspects of SAVAN quite highly with eight of the 11 factors receiving an average score of seven or greater. Two aspects received an average ranking between six and seven with only one item receiving an average score below the scale midpoint of five.

The highest rated, or most impressive, process components were: the responders' agencies relationship with Appriss/VINE, i.e. the provision of technical assistance ($X=7.56$), the responsiveness of the SAVAN system operators ($X=7.35$), the accessibility of services ($X=7.29$), and SAVAN maintenance and troubleshooting ($X=7.28$). The fiscal management of the SAVAN system ($X=7.18$), the actual notification process itself ($X=7.07$) and the development and installation processes ($X=7.04$) were also perceived to be highly effective.

The survey participants agreed that the SAVAN system has substantially improved the ability to track offenders for both members of the criminal justice system and for crime victims and their families. Eighteen respondents (42.9%) suggested that the system has had a great impact in this area with another 13 (31%) noting that it has exerted an average level of impact. Nineteen percent felt that it has demonstrated a minimal impact with the remaining 7.1 percent noting that SAVAN has had no impact on improving the effectiveness of tracking offenders and determining their location.

Seven factors were identified based upon the goals and objectives of the SAVAN initiative with the respondents being asked to rank each on a ten-point scale ranging from one (no impact) to 10 (great impact). All of the seven factors received average rankings above the scale midpoint of five, suggesting that the system has exerted a positive and strong impact and is achieving its stated goals and objectives. The two primary goals of enabling victim notification to occur, and to make this process less burdensome on local criminal justice agencies, ($X=6.80$) and the goal of increasing victim awareness, regarding the location of offenders, ($X=6.85$) received the highest average scores. The goal of informing victims of their respective court cases received an average impact score of 5.92 with the actual impact of SAVAN on the local criminal justice system receiving a slightly higher score of 5.97. Thus the findings validate the assumption that the SAVAN network is accomplishing one of its intended purposes and demonstrating an above average impact on reducing, or minimizing, the workload of the local criminal justice agencies as related to victim notification.

SAVAN is also exerting a substantial positive impact on its primary customers, i.e. victims of crime. The perceived impact of the network, on enhancing and maintaining victim safety, was considerable with an average ranking of 6.74 being reported. Other secondary goals, and even unintended or unexpected positive goals, are also being attained. The system is exerting an above average impact on the local community (X=5.79) and is also perceived to be somewhat effective at reducing and preventing future acts of violence between the registered victims and their offenders (X=5.47).

Basic cost-benefit aspects were included in the study in an effort to further delineate the fiscal impact of SAVAN and determine respondent perceptions regarding the amount of funds expended by their offices and how much it would cost their respective offices to carry out the mandate of victim notification should SAVAN not exist.

Nearly one-half of the respondents felt that the benefits of SAVAN greatly exceed the costs associated with the system. An additional 12.9 percent suggested that the benefits slightly exceeded costs while 19.4 percent believed that costs and benefits were equal.

An overwhelming majority of the respondents (93.1%) noted that their offices are not currently expending any SAVAN related funds thus demonstrating the significant cost savings for the local sheriffs' and prosecutors' offices. However, should SAVAN cease to exist an entirely different perspective emerges with the victim notification requirement reverting back to the local criminal justice agencies resulting in increased costs in this area. The amount of this shifting cost varied from an estimated \$ 300 per month to \$ 25,000 per month depending on primarily the number of victims in an area and staffing requirements. The average cost for the local agencies to pick up victim notification, should SAVAN become inoperable, would be \$ 7,118 per month or \$ 85,416 per year.

Without SAVAN all 100 sheriffs' offices would be required to notify victims regarding custody status and all 39 district attorney offices would be required to do the same for court notifications. Consequently, this would produce an annual, combined expenditure of \$ 12,264,276 for local governments (sheriff's office annual average of \$ 98,508 x 100 offices + district attorneys' annual average of \$61,884 x 39 offices). The current annual cost for a single, state operated automated notification system is \$ 1,170,720. Contrasting this cost against the cost of 139 local and autonomous notification systems reveals the tremendous cost savings produced by the existence of the SAVAN network.

Respondents were asked to provide rankings on four criteria that addressed the direct benefits of SAVAN on their respective agencies. A 10 point scale, ranging from one (least beneficial) to 10 (most beneficial), was used for identifying these agency- specific benefits of SAVAN. These four factors included: the reduction of time involved in victim notification, personnel savings, fulfilling the notification mandate and improving community relations. All four variables received average rankings above the scale midpoint of five with the most significant benefit being that the SAVAN system enables local agencies to meet the victim notification mandate as delineated in the state's Victims' Bill of Rights (X=7.61).

Direct benefits to crime victims were also assessed as part of the SAVAN process and impact evaluation with seven factors being included in the survey instrument. These questions addressed the benefits of registration, alerting crime victims to potential danger, notification of court dates, offender location and movement; as well as accurate notification and the prompt termination of calls. The same ten point Likert scale was used to assess these victim-specific benefits of SAVAN. Again, all scores received average rankings greater than the scale midpoint. Indeed, the scores were considerably high ranging from 42 percent, above the midpoint, to 58 percent above the middle of the scale.

The greatest victim benefit was reported to be prompt and timely termination of calls once the victim entered the correct PIN number into the system ($X=7.88$). Registration ($X=7.61$), accurate notification as defined by the correct person receiving notification ($X=7.47$) and the receipt of prompt notification at offender movement ($X=7.28$) were all noted as substantial victim benefits. The notification of offender court dates ($X=7.21$), a lessening of victim concern regarding offender location ($X=7.11$) and alerting victims to potential and future danger ($X=7.08$) also emerged as important victim-specific benefits which are being derived from the SAVAN system.

As part of the questionnaire survey participants were asked to elucidate their thoughts on permanent funding for SAVAN, specifically on whether the state legislature should provide continuation funding for the SAVAN network. Respondents were also encouraged to state why they felt continuation funding was needed or conversely, if opposed, why not. Respondents overwhelmingly supported the notion of legislative support for the SAVAN system with 86.8 percent agreeing that the General Assembly should explore the provision of permanent funding for SAVAN. Respondents, who supported this position, noted that it would improve the efficiency of the system, be beneficial for protecting victims, and that a permanent network is better than individuals having to make telephone calls. Respondents, in the minority, who disagreed with the concept of legislative support noted that funding would be better spent elsewhere and that they would only support funding if the network was improved.

Perhaps, the best test of any product or service is the extent to which its primary users or customers rate the efficacy of the service in terms of meeting their needs and expectations. Selected findings from the victim survey included:

Eighty-six percent stated that they had no prior knowledge of SAVAN while the remaining 14 percent did acknowledge an awareness of this service prior to registering for feedback and updates on the status of their respective cases in the court system.

Eight-six percent were satisfied with the service as related to the accuracy of the court dates that they received while the remaining 14 percent reported that they did not receive accurate court dates.

A full 80 percent, of the victims in the court notification sample, revealed that using the SAVAN system provided them with a sense of safety and security. Five (20%) survey participants reported that SAVAN did not provide them with this level of comfort.

Comparable findings were also reported by those victims that were included in the jail/offender movement subset.

Three salient policy recommendations emerged from the study findings: the need for a greater and more intensified public relations campaign, the introduction of legislation to provide sustained funding for the SAVAN network, and a need for a more in-depth examination of reported technical problems, both frequency and magnitude.