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## Victim-notification system celebrates 15 years

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Logically, Debra Puglisi Sharp knows that the man who is serving 10 life sentences in Delaware for killing her husband, raping her and holding her hostage for five days should never get out of prison.

But she said she takes nothing for granted and wants to know where he is at all times.

"I don't have complete faith in the judicial system," Puglisi Sharp said. "I need to know exactly where he is."

A victim-notification system first developed in Kentucky allows her to do just that, providing her and other victims a level of security by letting them track their offenders.

Since it was first launched 15 years ago Sunday, 47 states have begun using VINE — which stands for Victim Information and Notification Everyday. It is owned and operated by local company Appriss Inc.

The system was created after a Louisville woman named Mary Byron was killed in 1993 by a man who had been arrested for raping her and was let out of jail and was waiting for her outside Mall St. Matthews.

Sharp was the first person to register with VINE when it came to Delaware in February 2008. The system alerts crime victims when their offender is being released from jail, moved to another prison or released from prison on parole or for completing a sentence.

Users can make a toll-free phone call or go online at [www.vinelink.com](http://www.vinelink.com) to check an offender's information. They also can register to be automatically notified by phone or e-mail if an offender's custody status changes.

Each month, VINE handles 1 million e-mails and 1.5 million phone calls nationwide.

And in the coming months, they will also be able to receive text messages. The service is provided in Spanish in some places and is equipped to notify people who can't hear through use of a TTY device.

"It's really, really helped people," said Ed Wutzer, the VINE program director with the New York State Sheriff's Association. "What they've been able to do is to blend technology into the criminal justice system in a way that helps crime victims."

Over the past 15 years, the program has expanded to include 2,600 communities. It operates statewide in 40 states and in some communities in seven others. It launched this year in Connecticut and New Mexico and will soon be operational in Puerto Rico.

Only three states — Kansas, South Dakota and Maine — don't use the VINE system at all.

Denise Vazquez Troutman, director of the Center for Women and Families, said VINE is an important part of safety plans for women who are trying to get away from abusers. That way, any change in a perpetrator's custody is known and gives the woman time to find a safe location.

"That's probably the best thing they can do is register," Troutman said.

VINE owes its origins the tragic case of Byron, who on Dec. 6, 1993, was warming her car in the parking lot of the Mall St. Matthews before heading home to celebrate her 21st birthday when she was ambushed by Donovan Harris, who had been released from jail after he was arrested for raping her.

Harris had posted bond, traded a hunting rifle for a 9 mm handgun and then killed Byron, who had no way of knowing that he was out of jail. Harris is serving 999 years for her murder.

"There are Mary Byron's in every community," said Mike Davis, president of Appriss. "It gives them control over their lives."

For Pat Byron, this time of year is bittersweet, as she and her family gather together to remember Mary. The knowledge that VINE has grown so widely helps ease the sting of her painful memories, she said.

"I'm delighted that I know it's out there protecting untold numbers of people," Pat Byron said. "I just hope we never lose that protection."

Pat Byron said she doesn't call the system regularly, but she knows that Harris is in prison and not scheduled for release. But she said it gives her comfort to know that VINE is at her fingertips if she ever has anxiety.

"I can always check up if I want to," she said, "and that's the peace of mind that it gives everybody."

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