

Criminals' information revealed

By Ali Cheeseman

Delaware State News DOVER — Crime victims can breathe a little bit easier now that they can track offenders at all times through the justice system in Delaware.

With the state's new program, Victims Information and Notification Everyday, or VINE, victims can receive real-time information about custody status of inmates any time of day, by phone or Internet.

State officials unveiled the system Tuesday at the Delaware State Police Museum in Dover with featured guest Debra Puglisi Sharp, who was the first to register for the program. In April 1998, when Mrs. Sharp was living near Newark, she was working in her rose garden when local factory worker Donald Flagg entered her home, shot and killed her husband Nino Puglisi, raped and kidnapped her. For five days she was hog-tied in the captor's home off U.S. 40 until she was able to escape her bonds and dial 911. "In my case I was attacked in a place where every American should feel safe," she said Tuesday. "I could not imagine a victim's fear or helplessness to know that the offender was free."

Ten years after her tragedy and now living in Millsboro, Mrs. Sharp travels the country sharing her story to encourage other victims, while her abductor is serving 10 life sentences at the James T. Vaughn Correctional Center near Smyrna. But she said she is comforted that she can check if Flagg's custody status ever changes with the VINE program.

"I'm proud to stand before you today and excited that VINE is now available in Delaware," Mrs. Sharp said. "If they move (Flagg) or if he escapes, I would want to be the first person notified."

The First State is joining 44 others in implementing the program, said Nicole

Wilson, program co-ordinator with Delaware Criminal Justice Information System. But unlike other states, victims in Delaware can track offenders at every custody level. "It's a unique feature that's only in Delaware," she said. "Because we have an integrated system with all of the facilities, you can monitor from level five to level one." Level five offenders are behind bars, Ms. Wilson explained, progressively lessening in status to level one probation where the offender is walking the streets.

"Too many of our victims lie in bed at night, wondering if their offender is still locked up," said state Homeland Security Secretary David B. Mitchell. "This system allows any victim to pick up the phone 24 hours a day and make sure that person is still behind bars."

Registration in the notification system is free and anonymous, Ms. Wilson said, and anyone concerned with an inmate's status is encouraged to take advantage of it either by phone or Internet. Victims and concerned citizens can access the service by calling (877) DE8-VINE or www.vinelink.com and will need at least the inmate's last name and first initial or date of birth. Alerts can be sent either by phone or e-mail if the status of the inmate changes.

"Being more informed always makes people feel safer," said Gov. Ruth Ann Minner. "There is so much more than simply knowing someone is in custody. It's knowing where they are 24 hours a day. It's also about reducing that fear and making sure (victims) move forward with their lives instead of dwelling on what happened to them."

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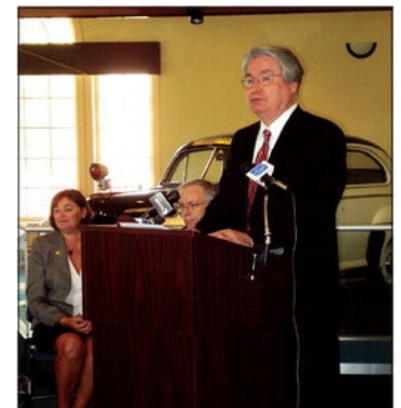
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Gov. Ruth Ann Minner discusses the importance of the VINE program Tuesday and how it will offer Delaware crime victims peace of mind, while Debra Puglisi Sharp and state prosecutor Richard G. Andrews listen.



Debra Puglisi Sharp, seated, registers for the state's new Victims Information and Notification Everyday (VINE) program Tuesday, joined by, from left, Gov. Ruth Ann Minner, state prosecutor Richard G. Andrews and VINE coordinator Nicole Wilson.



Delaware Homeland Security Secretary David B. Mitchell explains how the state's new VINE system gives victims and concerned citizens real-time information and updates on inmates' custody status.