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## Automated Victim Notification: Cost Considerations

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### STUDY OVERVIEW

This issue brief is the result of a U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) National Institute of Justice (NIJ)-funded evaluation of the Statewide Automated Victim Information and Notification (SAVIN) program administered by the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA). Funded in fall 2009, the purpose of this evaluation was to explore the implementation and operation of automated victim notification (AVN) systems in supporting victims of crime.

This issue brief provides an overview of the SAVIN program and identifies the current funding sources being used to support states' AVN systems. It then discusses cost considerations associated with the implementation and operation of AVN and the implications for system sustainability.

### THE SAVIN PROGRAM

In 2005, Congress established the Statewide Automated Victim Information and Notification program (Pub. L. 110-5, emb. secs. 101-104; Pub. L. No. 109-108, 119 Stat. 2290, 2299; 28 U.S.C. 530C(a)(1)) to support the implementation and ongoing improvement of statewide AVN systems. The SAVIN program was established to provide funding as well as critical structure and oversight to ensure that victim notification is implemented and occurs in a timely and standardized manner. Grants from the SAVIN program may be used to plan and implement new AVN systems or to expand and improve coverage, information, and notification functionality of existing AVN systems. Since the inception of the SAVIN program, BJA has provided funding and oversight for more than 80 grants, totaling more than \$50 million.

### CURRENT FUNDING

At the time of publication, 47 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico operate some form of AVN system. As of late 2012, the implementation and operation of these systems were primarily supported through Federal and state funding.

Findings from the evaluation indicated that 70% of states used Federal funding to support their AVN systems, with 13% exclusively relying on Federal funding. Given the targeted nature of the SAVIN program, it is not surprising that SAVIN was identified as the most common Federal funding source. Sixty-six percent of states reported actively supporting their system, at least in part, through a SAVIN grant. Other sources of Federal funding included the Victims of Crime Act (15%) and non-SAVIN BJA (9%) funding (e.g., Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant Program).

The majority of states (75%) also reported employing some form of state funding to support their AVN system. At this level, states were most successful in securing funding by integrating it as a line item in their state budgets (40%). States also funded their systems through the use of offender fines and fees (23%) and by incorporating funding as a requirement under offender telephone vendor contracts (11%).

### COST CONSIDERATIONS

Findings from the SAVIN evaluation highlight a wide range of direct and indirect costs associated with the implementation and operation of AVN systems. For states using an outside vendor to develop, implement, and/or operate their AVN system, the fees for these services were often cited as the system's largest monetary cost. Through this evaluation, however, researchers also identified noteworthy costs related to labor, information technology (IT), and training and marketing.

Cost considerations are discussed in broad terms because differentiating start-up and implementation costs from annual operational costs is complicated by the fact that most states with AVN systems have continued to make system improvements and upgrades. In addition, due to the lack of transparency in contract costs, turnover among system administrators, and the fact that system administrators were not always involved in applying for system funding or negotiating system contracts,

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the actual dollar cost for most states' systems could not be obtained.

### *Labor*

AVN systems operate under a range of administrative structures. Depending on a number of factors, one or multiple individuals may be responsible for the operational and financial management of an AVN system. The time and resources required of these individuals often ebbs and flows, depending on whether a state is implementing its AVN system, working to expand and improve an existing system, or simply engaging in day-to-day system operations. For example, depending on the history of collaborative efforts within each jurisdiction, obtaining stakeholder buy-in during the initial implementation may require substantial labor costs. However, individuals tasked with the operational and financial management of an AVN system are typically responsible for multiple programs, with AVN services only taking up a small portion of their time and resources.

Participating agencies also assume labor costs in that they often must attend meetings, address challenges within their facilities, and engage in training and marketing activities associated with AVN.

### *Information Technology*

The IT resources required to implement and operate AVN systems include labor costs, as well as costs to purchase and/or upgrade IT infrastructure and equipment. The individuals responsible for the operational and financial management of AVN in states with vendor-based systems generally did not report employing the services of internal IT staff or IT consultants in the operation of their AVN system. However, IT staff from these states described spending substantial time working with vendors to link data and iteratively test the system during initial implementation.

States with in-house systems were more explicit in reporting their need for and reliance on IT personnel for general operations. The costs for IT personnel are generally assumed to be higher for in-house systems than for vendor-operated systems. However, states with in-house systems report finding efficiencies in integrating their AVN services into pre-existing infrastructures. The increased IT staff costs for in-house systems may also be offset by the absence or reduction of vendor fees.

The availability of internal IT expertise varies across states as well as individual facilities, as does IT infrastructure and equipment. In some states, criminal justice agencies had to purchase and/or upgrade their IT infrastructure and equipment in order to implement their state's AVN system. This was more common in rural jurisdictions which tended to operate older, obsolete, or manual offender management and booking systems. When this was required, states often reported increased overall labor costs as staff needed to be trained on and adapt to new systems and practices. As technology improves and systems continue to evolve, it is likely that IT-related expenses will continue to change as states choose whether to maintain current functionality or implement new, innovative functions that require enhanced IT infrastructure and equipment.

### *Training and Marketing*

Once operational, states typically engage in a variety of training and marketing activities to ensure that law enforcement, victim advocates, and other first responders are aware of the system and are able to assist victims and others with the registration process. For states with vendor-operated AVN systems, training and marketing materials were often provided for in their contract. For these states, additional training and marketing costs varied depending on the extent to which they used these resources. For states with in-house systems, costs associated with the development, production, and implementation of these training and marketing efforts were contracted out or directly assumed by the states. For states with both vendor-operated and in-house systems, training and marketing costs also typically included the time and resources associated with travel because on-site training is conducted at the local level.

### *Potential Cost Savings*

The price of an AVN system must take into consideration the cost savings associated with the reduction or elimination of manual notification services. The more offenders processed through a system, conceivably the more manual notifications required, thus the more cost savings potentially associated with AVN services. A one-to-one cost savings cannot be assumed, however, since manual notifications are generally restricted to a subpopulation (e.g., victims) and most AVN systems are open to all public users. In addition, providing duplicative manual notifications limit the savings

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associated with reducing or eliminating manual notification services. It is difficult to measure the scope of manual notification and the extent to which it is duplicative because these efforts often vary by agency and individual victim service provider. Finally, if AVN is adopted as the primary means through which a jurisdiction provides notification, the legal costs associated with notification must be considered. For example, a jurisdiction may incur legal costs if the system is not fully implemented, does not provide notification in a legally sufficient manner (e.g., litigation), or provides incomplete, inaccurate, or undelivered notifications (e.g., reconsideration of proceedings).

The expected cost savings for automated notification is also associated with agencies being able to route information and notification inquiries to the system's call center. However, the findings from this evaluation indicate that these call centers often redirect victims to entities in their local jurisdictions when victims are seeking detailed information about a status change, court event, or custodial facility, as well as service referrals. Responding to these inquiries requires resources, which are often forgotten or not accounted for when assessing the overall price and potential cost-benefits of an AVN system.

## **SUSTAINABILITY**

In 2011, BJA suspended its SAVIN program indefinitely. Since SAVIN grants are provided for periods of up to 24 months, the impact of this suspension will not be fully realized until 2013 (or later for states receiving no-cost extensions); however, with 66% of states reporting that they were receiving SAVIN funding as of late 2012, the impact will likely be significant. Some states have identified sustainable funding streams through line items in state budgets, offender telephone vendor contracts, or other funding sources. However, limited funding has already resulted in some states changing the structure of their AVN systems by moving services in-house to reduce long-term operational costs; other states have suspended some of their AVN system services.

When asked what they would do if funding for their state's system was reduced, a number of administrators reported that they would likely reduce notification services to those that were legislatively required to receive notifications. States less certain about implications should their states' AVN systems

cease operation altogether. Criminal justice agencies and entities would continue to be responsible for notification under the law; however, in some states it remains unclear where this responsibility would fall and whether there would be resources available to support the provision of manual notification services. In addition, there is little information regarding what a transition from automated to manual notification services would entail. Given the scale of AVN systems currently operating within the United States, additional research is needed to examine these questions so, if necessary, states can make this transition in an informed, victim-centered manner.

## **SUMMARY**

Cost considerations for AVN systems must take into account each state's unique demographic characteristics (e.g., the population of incarcerated offenders, the number of custodial facilities) and system structures (e.g., whether the system is operated in-house or by an outside vendor, the number of participating facilities/branches, the availability of different system features). For example, a system operating throughout all criminal justice agencies may require more start-up costs for IT infrastructure or equipment than a system exclusively operating in the Department of Corrections. Similarly, the cost of implementing a statewide AVN system across all criminal justice agencies will cost less in Delaware than in Texas. The generally high costs of AVN systems highlight the importance of gaining a more in-depth understanding of the cost-benefit value of these systems.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Researchers identified key cost considerations associated with the implementation and operation of AVN systems based on interviews with system administrators, vendors, and other key stakeholders, as well as reviews of budget information provided by a select number of state administrators.

The findings presented in this brief are limited by the lack of relevant information available to researchers. Some states were unable to provide cost information due to nondisclosure agreements with vendors. In addition, many current administrators were not present at the start of implementation or did not recall start-up costs or internal resource burdens. These

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administrators often reported not having access to past cost information. For a more thorough analysis of the cost of AVN systems, several key steps need to occur, including: share financial information from vendor contracts, disentangle routine operating costs from improvement and upgrade costs, and collect systematic and representative measurements from the state's participating agencies about changes in burden on manual notifications and telephone calls requesting information about offender status. Due to states' limited knowledge of current and historical funding sources, lack of transparency in contract costs, and difficulty in systematically measuring system benefits (e.g., changes in staff burden, number of prevented incidents), gaining such an understanding will be extremely challenging.