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Automated Victim Notification: Practices Aimed at Supporting Victims

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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 highlights some of the practices that jurisdictions can employ to enhance AVN services for victims. These practices are specific to AVN registration and notification, and incorporate findings from all phases of the evaluation.

REGISTRATION

In many states, a victim or someone on the victim's behalf (e.g., a service provider) must register in order for the victim to receive AVN services. A few states proactively register victims, allowing those not interested to opt out. How a victim registers depends, in part, on whether the system is open to all public users or closed/restricted to a subpopulation (e.g., victims). There are benefits and drawbacks to both open and closed systems in terms of meeting the needs of victims. Open systems allow victims who have not reported their victimization, whose crimes were not successfully prosecuted, and who fall outside of statutory notification requirements to register against incarcerated offenders. Closed systems, on the other hand, allow for the provision of specialized services to victims; open systems are often unable to offer specialized services due to the anonymity and volume of registrations. In addition, some states offer dual systems where some notifications are offered to all public users and others are restricted.

Registration Features

Regardless of whether a system is open or closed, jurisdictions can enhance their registration process by

making it more user-friendly and proactively detecting data entry errors that may hinder future notification. For example, the registration process can be made more user-friendly by allowing victims multiple ways to locate an offender when registering online or checking an offender's status. Providing multiple search points for offender lookup, such as partial name and arrest date, can reduce burden and potential errors in identifying the correct offender for registration. In order to help victims verify that they are registering against the correct offender, some states also display offender photographs on the registration section of their AVN website. Displaying offender photographs can ensure accurate registration; however, it can also cause unintended trauma, especially if victims do not anticipate seeing an image of their offender as part of the registration process. One way to address this potential drawback is to offer a "show photo" option on the registration page where victims have the option of viewing a photo, but the photo does not appear automatically.

In addition, allowing victims to customize which notifications they want to receive (e.g., calls to court, escape, release, transfer) and in what mode they want to receive the notification can empower victims and help ensure that they receive the information they desire without being overburdened with additional notifications. As part of this service, AVN systems can ensure accurate notification across all modes by incorporating a mechanism to test and verify registration information upon initial entry.

Seamless Registration

Findings from the evaluation indicate that registering for AVN services should be seamless, whereby victims only need to register once to receive notifications as their offender moves through the criminal justice system. The criminal justice system can be complex and overwhelming for victims who may not be familiar with its structure or the roles and responsibilities of different branches. Victims can easily become confused by the need to reregister when offenders move through multiple branches of the criminal justice system. Seamless registration can

help ensure that victims receive continuous notification services, without requiring that they understand the nuances of the criminal justice system or their jurisdiction's AVN system.

Some states report that providing seamless registration is difficult due to the fact that offenders are assigned different identification numbers in the different branches of the criminal justice system. Other states, however, have begun employing innovative practices for overcoming this challenge. A few states employ a comprehensive matching algorithm that uses offenders' names, Social Security numbers, and dates of birth. Fingerprints can also be used to link offenders across branches of the criminal justice system.

In jurisdictions where seamless registration is not possible, notifications should specifically indicate when victims will need to reregister to continue receiving notification and should provide information on the registration process and who they can contact if they have questions.

NOTIFICATION

Another important component of AVN services is the provision of comprehensive information. Evaluation findings suggest that in some jurisdictions, notifications offer minimal, incomplete, or confusing information. If victims are unable to fully understand or interpret the implication of a notification, they may experience unnecessary stress or anxiety.

Based on feedback from stakeholders across all phases of the evaluation, researchers recommend that status change notifications specify the type of status change and, in cases of transfer, the location to which an offender is being moved. In jurisdictions where participation by all branches of the criminal justice system is not possible, notifications should specifically indicate when an offender is being transferred from a facility or branch that does provide automated notification to one that does not; such notifications should clearly state that the offender remains in custody and should provide information on the location to which the offender is being transferred. Similarly, as previously stated, in jurisdictions where seamless registration is not possible, transfer notifications should specifically indicate that the victim will need to reregister to

continue receiving automated notification and should provide information on the registration process.

Court notifications should also provide comprehensive information, including the offender's full name and information on the purpose of the court event (e.g., bond motion, sentencing). Providing this information may assist victims in deciding whether to attend such events, and better prepare them for any potential change in their offender's status that may result from the event. Offender case numbers should also be provided so that victims registered against offenders with multiple charges know what charge the notification is related to. Finally, all automated notifications should provide information on who the victim can contact if they have questions or require additional information or assistance.

SUMMARY

Over the past two decades, many states and localities have implemented AVN systems in order to meet the needs of victims in their jurisdiction and fulfill their notification requirements. As an automated service, AVN systems have the ability to provide victims with a wealth of information, offering notifications of status changes and court events well beyond those designated by statute.

Findings from this evaluation indicate high satisfaction with AVN systems among registered victims; however, they also suggest that systems could be enhanced to better respond to the multiple needs and diverse populations of victims. Registration should be made as simple and customizable as possible, and notifications should provide comprehensive information to ensure that AVN systems are adequately meeting the needs of victims.

In addition, further research is needed to assess the security of victim data maintained by AVN systems, processes for destroying data no longer required for notification, and the extent to which data maintained by AVN systems is protected by law. Research should also explore the role of privacy and anonymity on victims' decision to register for AVN.

METHODOLOGY

Information presented in this issue brief was collected from multiple sources, including multiple iterations of interviews with system administrators,¹ surveys of service providers and victims, and case studies of states employing a range of practices for providing notification services.

The findings presented in this brief are limited by researchers' ability to interview system administrators during each iteration of interviews and agencies providing AVN services, in states where case studies were conducted. Researchers' ability to obtain comprehensive information on states' AVN systems was also limited by administrator turnover both prior to and during the evaluation.

In addition, the ability to assess representativeness and generalize findings from the survey of service providers and victims was hindered by the lack of an existing list of all eligible service providers, the use of snowball sampling in the survey of service providers, and the fact that the survey of victims was distributed through service providers using non-probability methods, thus limited to victims seeking services who actively volunteered to complete the survey. Also for these reasons, a valid response rate could not be generated for either survey, and the extent to which findings were representative of service providers' and victims' experience with AVN is unknown.

¹ Individuals tasked with overseeing the operation and/or financial management of AVN services.