



Volume 2 Issue 2

The Victim Services Program
Vermont Department of Corrections

A table setting from Victim Services' display SAVING A PLACE AT THE TABLE

Greetings From the Director

Amy Holloway

Just as the monsoon season (formerly and affectionately known as SUMMER) was drawing to a close, I realized that time was running out on getting a summer issue of THE TABLE published. I watched as the days grew shorter, the nights grew colder, and the piles on my desk grew higher. I have finally come to grips with the fact that all my attempts to get this issue out last week, the last official week of summer, were futile. As a result, this will be the combined Summer/Fall 2008 issue of THE TABLE.

It should be no surprise that this issue will again feature information about the VAN Service (Vermont Automated Notification). I know it has been featured many times before in this newsletter but if you are one of those typical "adult learners" like I, who need to be told something well in excess of five times before it sinks in, then you might appreciate the repetition. To those of you who are less "adult" than I and who therefore don't need to be told as many times as I do, I have four words for you... YOUR TIME WILL COME!

As we get closer to getting the VAN Service up and running, it is important for us to be prepared. Over the past few months a great deal of work has been done to get ready to automate the victim notification system; a vendor has been selected, the work group has been working continuously to evaluate the database and to further refine the design for the system, a new victim notification directive has been drafted, a series of statewide training summits have been planned, and most of the offender files have been audited and their victim notification information entered in the Victim Services database. One of the more exciting things to happen in the last few months is the creation of a logo for the VAN service. It is a symbol developed by a local graphic artist and crime survivor who, in collaboration with the workgroup, developed a look for the automated system that is distinctively Vermont. The logo (which makes its debut in this newsletter and can be found on page 2) will be used on all of the public awareness and public relations materials associated with the VAN Service.

Other things to look for in this issue: An article on the Apology Letter Bank and an article about what it will mean to provide victim services in the wake of automated notification.

Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't spend some time on this page acknowledging the difficult summer that this department has endured. You need not look any further than the weather for an indication of what kind of summer it has been...cold, bleak, and stormy. Between the challenges of re-

(Continued on page 3)

INTRODUCING THE VAN SERVICE LOGO

Every product needs a “look”. Nike has the swoosh. Coke has the ubiquitous red can in a thousand different languages. Target has the bull’s eye.

We are pleased to announce that now the VAN Service has its own looks as well. While it might never be on as many t-shirts as the swoosh we are hoping that the new logo will come to be identified by the citizens of Vermont with the VAN Service, where anyone can go to get information about an offender under the supervision of the Vermont Department of Corrections.

We would like to thank Sandy Korda of *Image 911* for designing the new VAN Service Logo. Sandy worked with the DOC’s Victim Notification Workgroup to come up with a design that incorporated some distinct aspects of the State and the notification service .

When asked about the design of the logo Mr. Korda responded, “ I was looking for an image that both victims and advocates can rally behind, that symbolizes information reaching out from a central core to key individuals, that suggest people (both child and adult alike) in the form of stylized arrows, that is an uplifting and positive image that each person seeing it can identify with, that reminds those associated with the VAN Service that they are NOT alone, and are in good company, and that through color (green) and shape (snowflake) is distinctive to Vermont. This logo can be displayed alone or with text and can be worn with pride by all - without concern of stereotype or ridicule” .



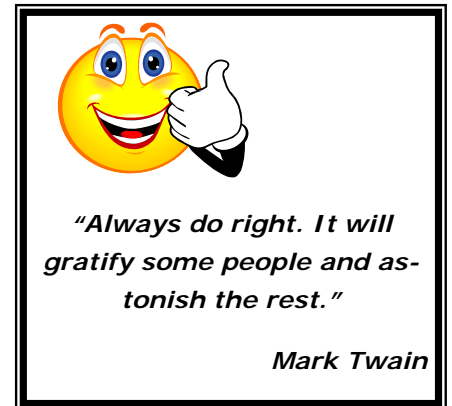
**VERMONT
AUTOMATED
NOTIFICATION
SERVICE**

Caught Ya Doing Something Good! *where we highlight those in the Department who go "above and beyond"*

As many of you know, the VAN Service Program staff (i.e. Jill Ryan and Ashley Fisk) have been working hard to get the automated notification service off the ground. A significant part of this effort has been Ashley's diligent efforts to audit all of the files of incarcerated offenders throughout our system to get the victim contact information into the new Victim Services database. This is all in anticipation of our getting a letter out to all victims who have requested notification to let them know about the automated system and how they can get registered on it. It was clear from the beginning of this audit effort that it was going to be difficult to keep the audit "current" with so many new offenders coming into the system and with all of the offender movement. We are aware that some cases might slip by us, so in an attempt to keep the information as current as possible, Jill put out a memo in July to all administrative staff, requesting that as of August 1, 2008 all new victim notification requests that come to any facility be faxed to the Victim Service office in Central Office. Once in the Victim Services Office the information is being added to the Victim Services database.

I am happy to say that the Administrative staff throughout the system are doing a great job of getting those victim notification request forms faxed to our office. This is the first step in our "Transition Plan" to go from our old system to the automated system and if the administrative staffs' response is any indication of how the rest of the transition will go I can see fewer sleepless nights in my future. Thank you so much to the Administrative Staff. WAY TO GO!

Admins. job well done.



(Continued from page 1) From the Director

structuring the Department, absorbing painful budget shortfalls, and enduring the aftermath of the horrific murder of Brooke Bennett, this has been a difficult time for all of us in Corrections. I have watched as the thoughtful, compassionate and professional individuals who work in this Department take on more and more in the face of less and less. It is no easy task to endure an uncertain future, amidst the feelings of frustration and fatigue and to continue to provide quality service, to create new solutions to old problems, to respond to a never ending onslaught of criticism and accusations and to grieve the loss of a young life.

During times like these, we are painfully aware of the complexity of the work we do and the tremendous amount of responsibility we have for the safety and security of the citizens of Vermont. It is a task that none of us take lightly, but we must never forget to also take a little time each day to take care of ourselves and each other.

Amy

"I Have a Question..."



How exactly will the VAN Service work, what will I have to do once it is up and running, and will it mean we no longer have to contact victims directly?

The VAN Service will make the caseworker's job a bit easier when it comes to providing notification to victims about upcoming releases, re-incarcerations, and upcoming parole hearings and outcomes.

IT DOES NOT MEAN THAT DOC STAFF WILL NEVER HAVE TO BE IN DIRECT CONTACT WITH A VICTIM. See article on Page 5.

Here are some of the more outstanding features

- * The VAN Service is an open system, which means anyone can register for notification. Upon registering registrants will be asked to designate if they are a direct victim, affected party, or a member of the law enforcement or criminal justice community.
- * Notifications will be done automatically. Case workers will not have to send letters to victims as they have in the past.
- * Registrants can register through a toll free 800 number or on the internet
- * Registration is immediate and won't depend on DOC staff entering notification information into the DOC database
- * Registrants can register to receive notification by phone or email and can register to receive calls on several different phone numbers.
- * Upon registration each registrant will be given a PIN number which will be used by the registrant to signal the system that the notification call was re-



ceived.

- * There will be a script for each type of call made to the registrant that will direct registrants to follow up with the caseworker, and/or the Victim Services Program to "zero" out to a 24 hour operator
- * All victim contact information is kept confidential. Caseworkers will be given a password to access victim contact information for ORP and Case/release planning purposes only.
- * In addition to the automated notification, Victim Services will assume responsibility for sending a back-up letter to victims in advance of a 90 day re-integrative furlough, 30 days before a parole hearing and with the parole hearing outcome. All other notifications will be done only by the VAN Service through an automated phone call or email.
- * Staff will still be required to make a contact by phone/email or face-to-face meeting for certain "events" such as when an offender dies, if an offender has been interviewed by the

VAN Service Training Coming to a Location Near You

Training on the new VAN Service will be coming to a location near you in the not too distant future but first we have to complete a few major tasks. Here is an update on those efforts.

System Design: All contract negotiations have been completed with the automated system vendor, Appris (thank you Marcy and Marie) and we have begun the design process with their design team. Ashley and Amy will be travelling to Louisville in October to meet the team in person, tour the facility and finish the last of the design work, including writing the “scripts” that will be used during automated phone calls, identifying notification events for which phone calls and emails will be made and doing the final design on the registration and information pages of the website registrants will use to register for notification on the internet.

Test Period: Once the fancy computer interface work has been done, we will do a test run of the system, using members of the DOC’s Victim Notification Workgroup as guinea pigs to make sure that the system is working and that notifications are going out as expected. The test period should last a few months and once as many of the kinks as possible are worked out we will set a date to “go live”.

Directive: A new draft Victim Notification Directive has been done and is working its way through the system. The plan is to have it approved in time to do department-wide training on the VAN Service.

Training: The VAN Service training will be coordinated by members of the DOC’s Victim Notification Work Group and will be taking place throughout the State in the following locations; Burlington, St. Albans, Newport, St. Johnsbury, Rutland and Springfield. Final dates to be announced once the test period is underway and a “go live” date is set. Staff from both field and jail facilities will be expected to participate in a half day training to learn about how to use the new system and to familiarize themselves with the new directive .



(Continued from page 4) I HAVE A QUESTION

media and may appear on TV/radio or in the newspaper, if a compassionate furlough has been granted for a funeral, if a request for a parole hearing is being made out of the regular cycle, and for any request the victim might make to be notified of an activity that might impact his/her safety. (These will be enumerated in the new Victim Services Directive) Staff members will still have to be involved with victims directly as the offender’s ORP and release plans are being developed.

- * DOC Staff members can register be notified about any of the offenders on their caseload
- * A red VICNOT designation will still appear on the offender database so that staff will know if there is victim contact information in the VAN System
- * Staff will be trained on how to register on the system and how to help victims register who may

Victim Services -Post Automation

There might be a tendency to “jump for joy” at the thought of not having to do victim notification once the VAN Service is up and running. The current system is cumbersome, labor intensive and often not very effective. The new system will relieve staff of the responsibility of actually writing victim notification letters or calling victims when there isn't time to write and send a letter. This will definitely save staff a good deal of time, not to mention a bit of \$\$\$ because you will no longer have to pay the cost of a registered letter.

However, before you go out and plan the parade in honor of the Victim Services Program, you need to consider that just because victim notification will no longer be on your plate, it doesn't mean that as a member of the Department of Correction's staff, you are not responsible for providing victims with services.

An integral part of what we do in Corrections is making the victim, if he/she chooses, a part of the offender's ORP and case/release planning process. That means outreach should be made to a victim while you are working with the offender to solicit the his/her input about the impact the crime has had on his/her life since the crime was committed, to discuss with the victim an offender's proposed residence upon release to determine if there are any safety issues, and to inform the victim of any issues around the offender's programming that he/she needs to know about to make informed decisions about their future with or without the offender.

Victims are partners with the DOC. They have a stake in what we do and how we do it, and without their input we won't have a complete picture of what is going on with the individuals we are charged with supervising.

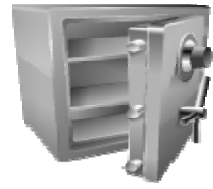
I won't bore you with another milking stool story, but I think of doing Corrections work without including the victim's voice much like the experience of looking at something in front of you with one eye covered up. You may see what is before you clearly enough, depending on your eyesight in the uncovered eye, but the view would not only lack depth perception but would limit your peripheral vision leaving you unprepared for the surprises that might crop up from the side. Using both eyes gives you a much clearer and wider picture.

So, while you won't have to do those pesky victim notification letters anymore, or smack yourself on the forehead when you realize that “oops” you forgot to call the victim to let him/her know that the offender

made bail/ went to court/ got out on RR/CR/Parole/maxed out/was re-arrested/violated/.....(you get the picture) you still need to include the victim in any plans that you make on the offender's behalf.



Apology Letter Bank Revisited



In the previous issue of THE TABLE there was an article that introduced DOC staff to the Apology Letter Bank. To review, the Apology Letter Bank is a file maintained by the Victim Services Program into which letters of apology, clarification letters or any unsolicited correspondence from an offender to a victim are filed. Victim Services reviews all documents that come in, send feedback to offenders when appropriate and share these documents with the victim only at the victim's request and only on the victims terms.

I am revisiting the issue of the Apology Letter Bank in light of a recent incident which brought home the importance of every staff member being aware of the existence of the Letter Bank and the importance of letting offenders know about (and using) it as well.

Last month an offender, who committed a double murder several years ago in the southern part of the state, wrote a letter to the editor of the Rutland Herald on the 13 anniversary of the murders. In this letter , he sought to apologize to the victims' family, the community members where the murders took place , and the citizens of Vermont. The Herald chose, instead of printing the letter as an letter to the editor, to make this a news story and published a rather fair piece. Victim Services was alerted by the State's Attorneys Victim Advocates in the county where the crime was committed and by the reporter herself. Contact was made immediately with the victims' family to inform them of the upcoming article and to provide them with support.

The offender thought that his efforts would be seen as a sincere restorative act that would be welcomed by the victims' family members. This, however, was not the case. The family and members of the community were re-traumatized by the letter. They felt imposed upon by the offender's choice to write the letter and did not see his attempts to say he was sorry as sincere. While he had a constitutional right to write a letter of this kind, they considered his need to unburden himself on the anniversary of the murder of their loved ones as a selfish and abusive act. While he may have meant the letter as an act of contrition, and his motives may have been pure, he did not get the outcome he was seeking and they were upset and hurt. It turned out to be a basic lose/lose proposition.

In my statements to the reporter, I commented that letters of apology or restorative acts should be victim centered and victim initiated. Offenders should never assume that they have the right to impose their need to say they are sorry on a victim who may not want to or be ready to hear it. This is a particularly hard concept for offenders to grasp. They are understandably eager, once they realize the impact of what they have done, to say they are sorry and seek "forgiveness". Those who work with offenders and want to support their restorative acts have to understand that it is not restorative when an offender imposes him/herself upon the victim's life unless the victim chooses to have him/her there no matter how sincere he/she feels his/her efforts to apologize are.

This is why the Apology Letter Bank is a critical tool for both offenders and victims and why it is so important to let offenders know about this option. The purpose of the Apology Letter Bank, therefore, is not to restrict the offender's right to expression, but to make sure the restorative efforts of any offenders are successful and do not cause further trauma to the victim . In the future if you have an offender who wishes to communicate through a letter to the victims of his/her crime, please let him/her know about the Apology letter bank and contact Amy Holloway in the Victim Services Office (241-2302) for further assistance.