



PUBLIC SAFETY

Alerts to crime victims in Vermont are full of flaws

State employees working with victims say the system doesn't work — some even tell people not to sign up. For one woman, an “unbelievable gap” led to life-altering danger.

By Charlotte Oliver

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Kelsey Rice poses for a photo in Brattleboro in March 2025. Photo by Catherine Morrissey/CNS

Charlotte Oliver is a reporter with the Community News Service, a University of Vermont journalism internship.

On a Sunday night Kelsey Rice found her abuser at her home again, out on bail after an arrest hours earlier. The courts had ordered him to stay away. He didn't.

He assaulted her that March 2019 night, she said, threatening to kill them both — and not for the first time.

Authorities should've told Rice that the man was getting out. She didn't get a call till days later, she told state lawmakers this past fall.

Crime victims in Vermont **have the legal right** to get timely notifications about the movements of those charged with or convicted of harming them. It's through a system called VINELink, which Vermont pays hundreds of thousands of dollars for and is managed by the state. But gaps are common, say victims and advocates, and Rice's experience shows one of many ways those lapses can have dangerous consequences.

“Every aspect of my life has been forever altered,” Rice said, “and I'll continue to have to manage that for the rest of my life and the impact on my children.”

State employees who work directly with victims concur the system doesn't work as intended — and see it as part of a larger state failure to support victims of crimes.

“I have several horror stories,” said Meghan Place, a victim advocate for the Department of State's Attorneys and Sheriffs. She's sure every advocate does.

Lawmakers got wind of issues last fall in a legislative oversight committee meeting. Now, some of them want to change how the system works in Vermont with proposals from victim advocates.

Corrections officials disagree that the service doesn't work, attributing gaps to data errors that their department tries to solve every day. They've recently marshalled a working group to assess the system.

Nobody at VINE, the Louisville company that makes VINELink, responded to three emails seeking comment across two days. Community News Service tried reaching reps for the company by phone seven times over the course of a week; the people who answered repeatedly referred questions to the same email address.

Little confidence

Notifications through VINELink are designed to give victims timely notice when their offender is released or transferred. The updates come via automated phone call, text or email. People can sign up after talking to a victim advocate or specialist — a state employee assigned to support survivors as they deal with the justice system.

The service is used by 48 states in different ways, and Vermont first contracted for it in 2008. VINE — Victim Information and Notification Everyday — is owned by data analytics company Appriss Insights, itself owned by multinational credit reporting agency Equifax.

The state **paid** \$414,827 for a five-year contract with Appriss to provide Vermont's victim notification service, up for renewal at the end of 2026. Officials **tout** its ability to eliminate human error and enhance public safety, offering services in different languages and live operators who work “around the clock.”

But most advocates with the state's attorneys department have little confidence in the system, **according to a survey prepared for legislators**. Many avoid recommending victims sign up entirely because of the potential for inaccuracies, said Place, who has worked in the field for 17 years and helped assemble the survey.

Many victims have gotten incorrect calls telling them an offender was released — when the person had actually gone to a medical facility or been transferred, said Jennifer Poehlmann, executive director of the Vermont Center for Crime Victim Services, in Feb. 12 testimony to the House Committee on Corrections and Institutions.

Victims have also gotten notices about people they don't know or cases that aren't theirs, she told legislators. Sometimes they never get a call at all, or sometimes it's far too late, she said.

“Getting that information at any point in time, even if one chooses, it is going to be traumatic,” Poehlmann said in a later interview.

But getting updates about the wrong offender, or not receiving notice about your own, undermines trust in the system, she said.

No notice

It’s well known among experts that trying to leave an abusive relationship carries a high risk of violence for the person being abused, which is why many stay. Forty-four percent of homicides in Vermont from 1994 to 2023 were related to domestic violence, according to a government report released this year.

Rice, who lives in the Brattleboro area, said she survived her partner’s abuse for years.

“But I reached the point where I knew someone was going to die, and we couldn’t continue to live this way. I needed to get us out,” Rice said.

And getting out wasn’t easy. Court and police records obtained by Community News Service show as much.

Reporting domestic violence — especially in full — carries a lot of shame, Rice said. But she sought help from police in 2018. In at least one episode, which the man later pleaded guilty to, he took away Rice’s phone during an argument so that she couldn’t call police.

Then he grabbed her face with both of his hands, he said in a plea agreement. Rice said the violence was much worse.



Kelsey Rice told legislators that the state's alert system for crime victims failed her. Photo by Catherine Morrissey

Across that fall, the man had a court order to stay away from Rice. A few months later came the weekend in March. She didn't tell police then about any assault — just that the man was violating court orders — fearful of him and wary after previous experiences with law enforcement. It would be years until she'd testify that he raped her those nights in March.

Days after the incident Rice was back at work, “trying to keep all the balls in the air,” when she got the robotic call announcing the man's release, she said. She ran to the bathroom to throw up.

Then the number called over and over — until she typed in a code noting she had received the message, she said. “Every time it would ring, it would be another trauma reminder,” she said.

She wonders whether the delay was just timing, human error. Maybe nobody put info into the system over the weekend.

Whatever happened, she said, it was an “unbelievable gap.”

Rice said she was never told she would get updates about the man and had never heard of VINELink before those first calls.

After the 2019 episode, she said she continued to get calls, and not all were accurate.

One time the voice told her he was being released ahead of schedule, she said. “So I get this huge panic, huge trauma reminder,” she said — but then a later call would say he was only being transferred.

“That depletes me for the rest of the day and the week,” she said. “We need to change what that looks like — right?”

Officials: ‘System is working as designed’

Place, the victim advocate, said errors in VINELink are why she encourages few victims to enroll. Most she works with have experienced serious “physical or emotional harm,” she said, often domestic.

For those survivors, receiving any info about their offender is “very scary,” Place said, let alone an automated message that may be incorrect. She tells survivors to call immediately when they get a message, regardless of its content. From there she works to find out what’s going on.

She isn’t alone in her skepticism. The September 2024 survey asked advocates in the Department of State’s Attorneys and Sheriffs if they had confidence in the “operation and effectiveness” of the system.

Eighty percent of respondents selected “no.”

Place said problems with VINELink are both computer and human. Sometimes the system goes down, she said, and advocates have to manually update release or transfer dates. Other times human error causes info to go out incorrectly — or not at all, she said.

“These are safety issues we’re dealing with,” she said.

She cited one case where an offender was released without notice to the victim. “Her ex-partner and perpetrator came back and strangled her almost to death.”

That survivor didn’t get any notice until after her ex was rearrested, Place said.

Victim advocates might not have capacity to check in every time a call goes through the system. It’s recommended that victim advocates handle about 300 cases at a time, Poehlmann said. But those at the Department of State’s Attorneys and Sheriffs usually handle about 600, she said, which “is just not acceptable.”

After court, cases are usually passed off to specialists at the Department of Corrections.

Place left a job with the corrections department at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic because she was trying to manage almost 1,000 cases at once, she said. She went to work for the state’s attorneys department instead.

“It just felt like something really dangerous was going to happen, so I had to step away for my own mental health,” Place said.

Isaac Dayno, the executive director for policy and strategic initiatives at the Department of Corrections, said, “I think the system is working as designed,” after emphasizing that department employees are “constantly striving” to improve it.

Dayno said the problem is that VINELink is used both before and after court. There’s a lot of “instability” before a case resolves, and whether someone is held or released can change quickly, he said.

When state workers have high caseloads, it can be difficult to keep up, he said.

Dayno wasn’t sure how many cases department victim specialists manage but acknowledged that “there’s just not enough staff in this field that can handle the high volume of cases.”

Community News Service asked Haley Sommer, director of communications and legislative affairs for the department, to respond to claims that the VINELink system is flawed.

Sommer said problems with the system “often result from data errors as opposed to errors inherent to the VINE system itself.” In those cases, staff make an effort to provide victims with “accurate and complete information,” she said.

Anna Nasset, a Vermonter by way of Washington state, has a very different experience using VINELink than Rice. She uses the platform through Washington’s system and said it gives her “great peace of mind.”

In the 13 years she’s used the platform, she’s never gotten an incorrect notification, she said.

Since Nasset’s stalker and abuser was arrested, she’s written **a book reflecting on abuse** and spoken publicly about her experience on national news networks. Her positive experience with VINELink has led her to volunteer on the company’s advisory council — and join the working group with the state corrections department, as did Rice.

Nasset, who’s been part of the conversation around VINELink in Vermont, sees victims’ negative experiences as a result of the way the state uses the system, she said, rather than of a flaw in the platform itself.

‘Not the voice that matters’

This legislative session, House lawmakers have been turning to victim advocates for recommendations. The Department of Corrections working group plans to review the system separate from the Legislature.

“When you hear testimony like that, then you need to do some follow-up action,” said Rep. Alice Emmons, D-Springfield, chair of the House corrections committee, referring to talks with advocates.

The state must ensure victims get accurate and timely info, while responding to individual needs with a trauma-informed approach, Emmons said.

Survivors and advocates want a more customizable system, said Poehlmann. That way survivors can choose to receive notifications only in certain instances and via a specific format. Giving survivors a choice is “really important to restore agency,” she said.

Some take issue with VINELink itself. Rice found the repeated, robotic calls insensitive. Many victims share that qualm, Poehlmann said.

“They went through a system where their voice really is not the voice that matters. It’s the state. It’s the defendant. The victim is a witness in our criminal justice process,” Poehlmann said.

Rice said she’s found healing in helping change the system by talking to law enforcement and legislators — and in her job providing mental health services for Easterseals.

She wants her experiences and expertise to help others “navigating this maze” of uncertainty in the justice system, she said.

“I can’t change what happened,” she added, “but I can try to make a difference for future generations.”