

State offers prison break alerts | [View Clip](#)
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'Reverse 911' notifies by e-mail, phone or text

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Concerned Maryland residents can now sign up for prison break alerts from any of the state's prison system areas.

Since October, Marylanders have been able to sign up for escape notifications, which many call "reverse 911," by e-mail, phone or text message. About 750 state residents were signed up as of Dec. 1.

Jessup, which has about 55 residents signed up, is one of nine prison regions, including Westover, Quantico, Church Hill, Baltimore, Charlotte Hall, Sykesville, Hagerstown and Cumberland. Anyone can sign up for alerts from any area and can receive in any or all of the three formats.

The new system was launched in October in Hagerstown, where the first escape in six years from a medium or maximum security prison took place early last year.

"This siren system is an old type of notification. Some people couldn't hear it," said Danielle Lueking, spokeswoman for the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services. "We decided it was about time we did something about this outdated system."

The new alert system could eventually replace a siren in Jessup, which will still be used. It was first used on Dec. 11 when an individual being escorted by an officer in Charlotte Hall ran away. State Police found the escapee a week later.

The new automated system is capable of making 15,000 phone calls a minute, Lueking said. The recorded message will include any information available about the escapee, which could include name, weight, race, eye color, hair, where the inmate escaped from and where local law enforcement believes the individual may be. It also will include tips for what to do should someone encounter an escapee. After the alerts, the department of public safety hopes citizens will keep up with local law enforcement and media.

The system was purchased in March from Avtex, a Minnesota company that has developed community notification systems since the 1970s. It includes a \$7,500 yearly service fee. The program is currently being used around the country by law enforcement, local governments and colleges and universities, according to the department of safety. People in Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Virginia can sign up for the alerts.

Roger Grabinski, president of the Jessup Improvement Association, thinks the new system is better than the outdated siren.

"Unless you've been in the community for some time, you don't know what the siren means," he said. "I think it's just a matter of getting the word out to the people that they need to sign up for this service."

He spoke with the association's other board members about the new system Monday night. He plans to inform other association members at the next general meeting and will post information on the group's Web site.

Jessup resident Fred Steffens sits on the Citizens Advisory Committee, a group of prison officials and community representatives, which informed Grabinski of the new system. As an older resident, he prefers the siren, but feels obligated to have a working alert system in Jessup.

Steffens knows there are some in the community who see the alarms as eerie reminders of who lives down the street.

"People would disable them if they're near their house," he said. "Not kids either, these were senior citizens."

An inmate from the Brockridge Correctional Facility in Jessup escaped from custody in July 2007. Antawan Jones, who was serving six years and seven months for burglary, was noted missing at a State Highway Administrative yard in Howard County. The state could not confirm whether or not this was the most recent escape by a Jessup inmate.

While the siren could be phased out when it goes into disrepair, Steffens said the contractor his group works with is able to get siren parts easier than in the past because of other prison systems turning their sirens off.

"I think most people would be happy if there was not an escape alarm system," he said. "People hear those alarms go off, it's sort of creepy."

To sign up for the alerts, visit www.dpscs.state.md.us/onlineservs/enr.