

# Peace of mind provided at no cost to residents

*Project Lifesaver uses technology to track missing people with dementia, other disorders*

By MELISSA MARTIN

*Brunswick Post editor*

It's a little past 4 a.m. and you just got out of bed for a drink of water and to check on your elderly father-in-law who has recently moved in with you due to his deteriorating medical condition and on-going battle with Alzheimer's.

As you make your way down the hall towards his bedroom, you notice both the light and the television is on in the room. While a pile of pajamas and a bathrobe lie on the floor next to a pair of slippers, there's no sign of your father-in-law.

Frantically, you check the rest of the house, calling his name, but there's no answer. Moments later, you notice the front door is slightly ajar and the fear strikes instantly — your father-in-law has gone on yet another of his middle-of-the-night jaunts and who knows how far he may have gotten this time.

"How far could he go?" you ask yourself. "Where did he go?"

Those are two questions residents in charge of taking care of their elderly parents no longer need to ask themselves

in the middle of a crisis situation, thanks to Project Lifesaver, a program offered through the Brunswick Division of Police that affords caregivers protection and peace of mind when it comes to tracking lost loved ones.

The program, which has been operational since 2007, uses state-of-the-art technology in the form of a wrist or ankle band equipped with a transponder that is capable of being heard by a series of hand-held radios and low-band antennas the police department has in its possession.

With the system, in the event that a person suffering from Alzheimer's, dementia, Down syndrome and even autism goes missing, the individual wearing the transponder is able to be located and brought back home, said Emil Stecki, the police department's volunteer coordinator and member of the city's Project Lifesaver Team.

"Since 1999, there have been more than 2,000 Project Lifesaver searches for missing individuals nationwide," Stecki said. "And in every one of those cases, the missing person has been returned



Photos by MELISSA MARTIN

Brunswick Police volunteer coordinator Emil Stecki, Detective Hank Papushak and Police Chief Carl DeForest show the equipment their department uses to track missing individuals as part of the Project Lifesaver program.

home safely in less than 30 minutes."

Locally, Stecki said the city hasn't been forced to conduct any searches of its own, other than during training exercises, but said the city is fortunate to have somewhat of a backup insurance policy in the event it ever needs one.

"We train on a regular basis and have a team of 21 officers and Brunswick Citizen Police Academy Alumni Association volunteers who are certified members of the Project Lifesaver program," he said, noting that Project Lifesaver is endorsed by the Alzheimer's Foundation of America and the National Sheriff's Organization.

The department currently oversees three children with autism who are enrolled in the program. Until recently, two more elderly patients were also being monitored by the division, however, one of those individuals died and the other is now in a nursing home.

Thanks to the generosity of commu-

nity philanthropic organizations, notably the Brunswick Eagles Aerie 3505 and the HANDS Foundation, the team is actively seeking new clients to enroll in the program.

"We know there has to be many more individuals out there who could benefit from a service such as this," Stecki said. "But somehow they haven't found us yet."

While being able to locate the individual in an emergency is ultimately the program's goal, it is only one component of the program. It's also an exercise in compassion for the police officers and volunteers involved.

"Seeing as that person who is located will be disoriented, anxious and untrusting, the Project Lifesaver is specially trained to know how to approach the person, gain his or her trust, and put the person at ease for the trip home," Stecki said.

What makes the program even more successful are the relationships that are forged between the clients and the administrator of the program.

Wendy Linderman, Brunswick's Project Lifesaver administrator, has been involved in the program since its inception in 2007 and said she has formed some very close bonds with the three boys she meets with on a regular basis.

As part of the program, clients wear a transponder on their wrists or ankles. Those units, which are similar in size and shape to a regular wrist watch, are battery operated and have to be serviced once a month.

Linderman said it's during that time that she is able to get the clients to trust not only her, but the police officers who oversee the program.

"I make sure to bring them a special treat whenever I come and, three or four times a year, we make sure to bring them a little gift," Linderman said, noting that during this last month the boys were given actual police badges they could wear

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## Lifesaver

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on their shirts.

"Those were definitely a hit," Linderman said.

The same trust is then built between police and volunteers and the patient's caregivers.

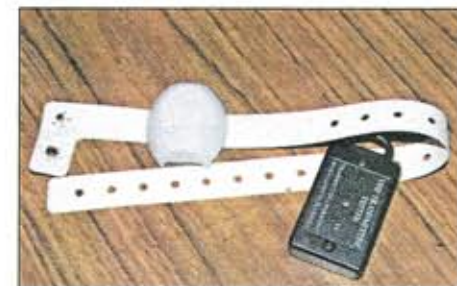
"I'll never forget the day we left our first client meeting and how the mother told me, 'Thank God I can now have peace of mind and I can finally sleep tonight,'" Stecki said. "After hearing that, I don't think my feet touched the ground I was so excited."

The program is not a baby-sitting service, in that clients must be under 24-hour care and must not have access to an automobile. Likewise, he said, patients and their caregivers must meet a series of criteria to be eligible to participate in the program, Stecki said.

To date, more than \$30,000 has been invested in the Brunswick program, which includes the cost of the transponders and antennas, as well as training. While clients were initially charged \$300 to \$400 a year to participate, the city is now able to offer the service free through a variety of grants and donations from the Brunswick Eagles, the Alzheimer's Association of America and Project Lifesaver International. Other sponsors include the HANDS Foundation, the Brunswick Old Fashioned Days Committee, the Central Ink Corporation and more.

More importantly, those donations have enabled the Project Lifesaver team to reimburse those who initially paid for the service.

"Originally, our client caregivers had to pay \$300 a year to lease the transmitting units and also incurred a \$120 maintenance fee to cover a year's supply of



Project Lifesaver clients are fitted with a white transponder on their wrist or ankle. The unit enables the city's police department to track the client's whereabouts in the event that person is reported missing.

batteries that are changed on a monthly basis," Stecki said. "As a result of the goodness of hearts from our financial supporters, all the money originally paid by the families has been returned and the service is now made available at no cost to those who qualify."

The Brunswick Division of Police has also donated \$900 in equipment, which includes hand-held electronic receivers and two specially designed antennae along with the wrist and ankle bracelets. Township individuals have also been trained to use the equipment and are expected to pilot the program in the community later this year.

The department is currently accepting applications from families looking to become a part of the Project Lifesaver program. Along with filling out forms, prospective clients and their families will also be interviewed prior to determining eligibility. For more information or to sign up, contact the Brunswick Division of Police at 330-225-9111.