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New System to Help Find Wanderers



Staff photo/Tim Johnson - Regina Johnson, who has early-stage Alzheimer's disease, speaks at a press conference on the Endangered Person Alert System Tuesday at the Alzheimer's Association's Council Bluffs office.

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The Midlands Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association and several law enforcement agencies introduced a new system Tuesday to help Iowa agencies locate people with Alzheimer's disease who wander off and cannot find their way back home.

The Endangered Person Alert System was announced during a press conference at the Alzheimer's Association's Council Bluffs office, which is housed in the American Red Cross-Loess Hills Chapter's building at 705 N. 16th St. It will be implemented as law enforcement agencies complete training.

The system was developed by a task force that included people from the Alzheimer's Association, Iowa Department of Public Safety, Iowa Department on Aging, Iowa Police Chiefs' Association and the Iowa State Sheriffs' and Deputies' Association, said Duane Gross, president and CEO of the Midlands Chapter. It establishes a specific set of criteria for issuing an Endangered Person Alert and outlines the procedure for doing so.

"Over two years ago, we started the process of addressing the safety of people with cognitive impairment," Gross said.

There are more than 30,000 Iowans with dementia, he said, and more than 60 percent of them will wander. If not found within 24 hours, up to half of the individuals who wander will suffer serious injury or death, a press kit document stated.

Changes Alzheimer's can cause that may affect safety include:

- Judgment: forgetting how to use household appliances
- Sense of time and place: getting lost on one's own street; being unable to recognize or find familiar areas in the home
 - Behavior: becoming easily confused, suspicious or fearful
 - Physical ability: having trouble with balance; using a walker or wheelchair to get around
 - Senses: experiencing changes in vision, hearing, sensitivity to temperatures or depth perception

A person may be at risk for wandering if he or she:

- Comes back from a regular walk or drive later than usual
- Tries to fulfill former obligations, such as going to work
- Tries or wants to go home, even when at home
- Is restless, paces or makes repetitive movements
- Has a hard time locating familiar places like the bathroom, bedroom or dining room
- Acts as if doing a hobby or chore, but nothing gets done (moves around pots and dirt without actually planting anything)
- Acts nervous or anxious in crowded areas, such as shopping malls or restaurants

A person's disappearance can create anxiety for both the patient and his/her family, said Jeff Cayler, who has seen many such cases during his 25 years as Carroll's chief of police.

"During that time, the department has had numerous occasions where we've had reports of people wandering," he said. "While most of the situations are resolved in a positive way, I can't really tell you that it's efficient."

It is important for law enforcement to get accurate information out to the public – and a photo, if possible, Cayler said.

"Only law enforcement can actually initiate the missing person advisory," he said.

Local law enforcement should begin an investigation immediately, he said.

One thing will not change: People still need to call 9-1-1 first to report a missing person, Cayler said.

"That's the first place to call," agreed Clay Freeman, program director for the Alzheimer's Association's Midlands Chapter.

The system is not intended to replace procedures already in place at local law enforcement agencies, Cayler said. Rather, it is to provide a template for small agencies and others that may not have an established protocol for handling such incidents.

It also is not designed to replace the Alzheimer's Association's Safe Return program, in which Alzheimer's patients wear a tag stating that they are memory-impaired and giving the toll-free number of a service center, where staff can fax a photo of the patient to local law enforcement agencies, Gross said.

"This will work hand in hand with Safe Return, a program the Alzheimer's Association has," he said.

It uses a "wide net of providers" to track someone down, Gross said.

"It involves everybody in the effort to bring this person back home," he said.

The Alzheimer's Association will train law enforcement agencies how to initiate an Endangered Person Advisory and how to interact with someone who has dementia, Gross said.

"We're not strangers to training law enforcement," he said. "We've done training with Omaha, Lincoln, Bellevue and La Vista (Neb.)"

Regina Johnson of Council Bluffs, who attends an early-stage support group sponsored by the Alzheimer's Association, applauded the new system.

"It'll make families more confident knowing that something is in place for people that have this," she said.

Johnson was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease about a year ago, her husband, Rollie, said. She is active in her church group and still drives occasionally, but not by herself – although she said "I can still find my way around town."

She works on puzzles and other activities to keep her mind active, she said.

"I can't go home and just sit down," she said.

Pottawattamie County Sheriff Jeff Danker was enthusiastic about the system.

"I think it's great," he said.

It's helpful to have a standard procedure to follow, Danker said.

"The sooner we can locate a person like that the better, because that's a scary situation ... We look forward to the training."•