

THE LOWDOWN

Sheriff Charles S. Blackwood

Since January 2019, the Orange County Sheriff's Office has assisted in the search for eight people with dementia who became lost. In six cases, we located the people unharmed; in two cases, the individuals died before being located.

In this edition of *The Lowdown*, I want to describe the many programs in place to support seniors and reduce tragedies like these. Helping members of our senior community age in place with dignity and support is central to our agency's vision statement. It is unlikely these programs would have helped one of the deceased individuals. He was a short-term visitor from out of state and therefore not enrolled in any of our initiatives. But had the other individual been enrolled, she might still be alive. She lived alone, and by the time anyone realized she was missing, she had wandered from home, fell into a creek, and died from exposure.

Wellness checks are the simplest service we offer. Anyone with concern about an Orange County resident should call 911. [If they are calling from another county or from out of state, the number is (919) 732-5063.] A deputy will be dispatched to check on the person. If they are unable to locate the person or discover any sort of emergency, appropriate next steps will be initiated.

We have three other programs to address situations with known, ongoing needs. Our Lifetrack program is a rapid response program provided free of charge to people in danger of wandering or becoming lost such as seniors or younger people with certain conditions such as Autism Spectrum Disorder. Enrolled residents wear a bracelet containing a battery operated transmitter. If a person wanders or is otherwise lost, the caregiver calls 911. Search and rescue personnel then use a mobile receiver to pick up the signal from the missing person's transmitter. About 40 residents are enrolled in the program. We are able to provide this equipment free of charge through the generosity of groups like the Alzheimer's Foundation of America, the Sheriff's Office Citizen Organization, and other community partners. Call Sergeant Roberson at (919) 245-2921 to learn more.

Josh's Hope is an informal database we maintain. People can opt in, letting deputies know critical information about a loved one with cognitive issues or mental health concerns. Essentially, the program provides deputies responding to a call with advanced knowledge that might increase how quickly the situation can be resolved. This minimizes stress for all involved.

Our third program is Seniors and Law Enforcement Together. Also known as SALT, this program is a partnership with the Department on Aging's Project Engage program. When a referral is made about a vulnerable senior in the community, the Department on Aging asks our Community Services Division to do a needs and safety assessment of the person and his or her residence as one part of the intake process. If the person qualifies for the program, a volunteer will regularly visit and provide quarterly updates to the Department on Aging. These visits lessen social isolation and monitor the person's changing needs. This program makes between 100 and 125 contacts with Orange County seniors each month.

There are two other county programs I want the community to know about. One is the new Community Paramedics Program. When an ambulance is dispatched to a medical call and the emergency medical technician recognizes the call involves either a person without a support system or a person with increasingly complex medical needs, he or she makes a referral to this program. Phone calls and regular home visits help keep problems from escalating and address new needs as they emerge. The community paramedics might also establish a premise alert in the dispatch system. This alert automatically notifies responding units about any special concerns at that residence. Call Kim Woodward (919) 245-6133 for more information.

Finally, I want to tell you about the Telephone Reassurance program, a free service from the Department on Aging. Trained volunteers make morning safety-check phone calls to seniors Monday through Friday. If calls remain unanswered after three attempts, volunteers notify staff to take further action. To learn more, contact Bobby Cobb at (919) 245-4241.

Let's keep our seniors safe and reduce avoidable tragedies. Please consider if one or more of these programs might benefit someone you care about. As always, call us if we can help.