

THE LOWDOWN

This article is a monthly feature in the News of Orange; it usually runs in the first monthly edition of the paper. However, I am writing this extra column to make readers aware of a vastly underutilized safety service available in our county; one so important I did not want to wait for September.

I will begin by describing the situation we faced last week. Wednesday morning a 75-year-old person with dementia wandered away from home in the early morning hours. After conducting a quick search, her husband reported her missing. Following an intense, coordinated search effort, rescuers found her at late Friday morning, almost 53 hours later, lying in a creek. Although she needed medical assessment and treatment for exposure, she suffered no serious injuries.

Statistics tell us that 75% of lost people with dementia are located within 1.2 miles of their last known point; this proved accurate in this case. When found, the woman was only .5 miles from her home and approximately 400 yards from the back of the nearest house.

We had a magnificent response from the statewide response management system. In all, more than 325 people from 36 agencies assisted in the search, and we had many more willing to help. We primarily used people with specialized training in search and rescue. Given the difficult wooded terrain, dense foliage, extreme humidity, and deep ravines, the search was a surprisingly technical. Searchers moved about on hands and knees in some areas. We also used many canine assets; these dogs provided information about where she had likely been. People with dementia tend to “ping pong” off obstacles, especially when lost. Consequently, the dogs did not have one scent trail to follow. It is possible the woman crisscrossed the terrain before ultimately landing in the creek.

The behavior profile for lost people with dementia predicts searchers will find the missing person in brush, along fence lines, in an outbuilding, or in a low-lying area. The lost person will often not call out to rescuers, even when they are passing nearby. We therefore needed to contact all nearby residents to ask them to search their properties carefully, particularly crawl spaces, gardens, vehicles, and under decks. Unfortunately, we had limited ability to make direct contact with residents of that area because only about a dozen people had registered their phones with the reverse 911 system. Usually used to warn people of danger such as severe weather, environmental hazards, or nearby criminal activity, we wanted to use this system to provide instructions about the specific assistance we needed from the woman’s neighbors.

When most people had landline telephones, reverse 911 systems had the ability to penetrate deeply into defined geographical areas. Now, few people have landlines, and people must opt in to register their cell phones. This has greatly diminished our ability to reach large numbers of people quickly.

In Orange County, **OC Alerts** is an invaluable tool to enhance YOUR safety. Not only would it have been useful to get specific messaging out to the missing person’s neighbors, it allows emergency management personnel to provide critical, time sensitive information in a variety of situations. If your neighborhood is under an evacuation order, for instance, you want to know that information as soon as possible.

Please go to www.ReadyOrange.org. This page contains information about disaster and emergency preparedness. The link to sign up for OC alerts is prominent in the middle of this page. Create an account, provide your contact numbers, and check the boxes to identify which type of alerts you

want to receive. The system also allow you to identify special needs you or your family may have, and you can indicate if you have specialized training or are willing to volunteer your skills or equipment during a crisis situation. [Select GMT: Eastern Standard Time America/New York as your time zone.]

I am delighted this search ended successfully. The event highlighted the amazing spirit and can-do attitude among people who choose emergency services as their life's work. We are so grateful for the flood of resources we had from all over the state, and we appreciate each donation, every call of support, and all the people who volunteered, whether we were able to deploy them or not.

The men and women of the Orange County Sheriff's Office work every day to improve the public safety of people who live in or travel through our area. Please do your part to help us help you. Register your phone(s) with OC Alerts. Remember:

If we can't reach you, we can't alert you!

I appreciate this monthly chance to give you the lowdown. Look for this column September 4 at its normal time. Please suggest ideas for future columns by emailing my Public Information Officer at astemper@orangecountync.gov. Thank you!