

2009 Herman Goldstein Award for Excellence in Problem-Oriented Policing

Project Summary:

Like many cities across the nation, the City of Irvine has seen an increase in the number of persons who are at-risk⁽¹⁾ and prone to wander away from caretakers or family members, namely persons suffering from Alzheimer's, Autism, Down Syndrome and other debilitating illnesses. Individuals with dementia or developmental disorders are at a greater risk for peril when they wander or become lost. In response, there is a need for law enforcement to initiate proactive measures to assist them in times of crisis by means of developing and implementing an effective response plan to personal safety.

The Irvine Police Department has instituted a program named the *Return Home Registry* (RHR). This innovative and highly successful program serves as an effective law enforcement tool used by the Irvine Police Department to locate missing persons who are found wandering and are often unable to direct officers to their home or caregiver.

As a result of the success of the *Return Home Registry*, the Irvine Police Department has contacted other law enforcement agencies over the past year in an effort to expand the program statewide. As a result, several agencies have participated in workshops sponsored by the Irvine Police Department where program information was distributed with hopes to replicate the program in other jurisdictions.

Scanning:

The City of Irvine has a vibrant and diverse population and has been one of the fastest growing cities in Southern California. Irvine has been ranked by *Money Magazine* as one of the "Hottest Towns" to live for populations over 100,000. Part of this population includes retirement communities, as well as private in-home care businesses for elderly and for the developmentally disabled.

As a result of the population growth in the City, there has been an increase in calls for service that involve lost or wandering persons who are at risk as a result of an illness or developmental disability. In the past, the Irvine Police Department utilized traditional law enforcement methods to respond to calls for service by establishing geographic perimeters and employing bloodhounds, regional air support, citizen watch groups and contacting news media. However, the Department has discovered over time that law enforcement agencies could be better prepared to respond and resolve these types of incidents more efficiently and expediently. This point has tragically been illustrated on more than one occasion when a wandering individual could not be located for an extended period of time and were found deceased – often just short distances from their homes.

As the *Return Home Registry* began to develop, it became evident that the program would need to extend past Irvine's borders. With the availability of mass transit, extensive off-street bike paths and pedestrian thoroughfares a lost or wandering at-risk adult or child could easily enter a neighboring jurisdiction. Because of this factor, it is necessary to expand the *Return Home Registry* to neighboring agencies.

Analysis:

The analysis leading to the development of the *Return Home Registry* began with the assistance of the Department's Crime Analysis and User Support divisions to determine the number of incidents that involved lost or found persons in the City. An issue that arose with researching these statistics was that the software program could not search specifically for those missing persons who were in the "at-risk" category.

However, at the time of this study, there were a number of high profile incidents that involved lost elderly adults coupled with news reports about the increasing numbers of persons diagnosed with Autism, Alzheimer's and Down's Syndrome.

In examining the protocol that law enforcement currently employs to respond to calls involving at-risk lost or wandering persons there were two primary issues:

1. How can law enforcement be more efficient in expediting an at-risk person's return home while minimizing their exposure to environmental, health and societal conditions (climate, criminals, access to medication, and other hazards)?
2. How can law enforcement improve calls for service involving missing persons who are suffering from dementia or developmental disabilities? The challenge in handling these calls is that at-risk individuals commonly do not know their biographical information to assist in locating their family or caregiver. Traditionally the internet, press releases, agency teletypes or a call from a concerned family member were the only tools available to reunite the person with their family or caregiver. In reviewing the traditional law enforcement response to these incidents, it was apparent that these were difficult and time intensive calls to handle.

During the analysis phase, the Department discovered that other law enforcement agencies were experiencing similar problems in handling these types of calls. One example was the daily Orange County Law Enforcement Teletype that routinely had missing persons listed who suffered from dementia or were developmentally challenged.

When handling calls involving missing persons who are at-risk, important information must be gathered quickly to disseminate to field personnel. This information includes biographical information, previous wandering patterns, current photographs and present cognitive condition. In surveying personnel and handling calls for service, it was determined that valuable time is routinely lost during the crucial early stages of investigation. Family members are commonly distraught and have difficulty providing important information to field personnel. Care providers for these individuals are also not prepared to provide important information and photographs.

One frequent problem encountered was that the photographs provided of the missing person were not in digital format. This required additional time to scan the image so it could be formatted on a flier for distribution.

Another obstacle encountered which was specific to the elderly with early stages of dementia was their apprehension about sharing information with law enforcement out of concern they may have their driver's license revoked.

In handling calls of elderly missing persons, it was not uncommon to encounter families who failed to provide adequate care or neglecting proper care for family members. As a result of discussions with families of the developmentally disabled, we also discovered there was a level of fear of the police, on the part of the individual based on past contacts or other reasons.

One of the difficulties encountered during the initial development of the program was the law associated with the Health Insurance Portability Protection Act (HIPPA). To be in compliance with the law, it was decided not to collect medical related data. To date, the exclusion of medical data has not impacted the effectiveness of the program.

Response:

The Irvine Police Department's development of the *Return Home Registry* program has greatly assisted officers in locating missing persons who are at-risk and helped return them to their homes when they were found wandering. The first stage of the program was to identify persons living in the City who were at-risk and then gain the trust of their families and caregivers. Police personnel assured prospective participants that the program would not "label" them or their loved ones. To overcome this concern we partnered with established organizations that were already familiar to families and jointly presented the program in relaxed settings that was outside the Police Department. This approach also allowed personnel to share their existing client lists to market the database. Some of the organizations include Alzheimer's Association, Down Syndrome Association, Autism Society and the Asperger's Group.

In order to have adequate staff to support this program, a cross section of personnel from different Divisions became part of the *Return Home Registry* staff. These Divisions include Patrol, Dispatch and Crime Prevention.

The Irvine Police Department utilized the City's website as another means to market the program and encourage residents to enroll in the program online. The Department also utilized public television to create an informal news segments viewed by Irvine residents. As a result, residents contacted the station and a greater number of residents accessed the City's web link for further program information.

Informational "countertop displays" were also purchased and strategically placed in the City's two senior centers and doctor's offices that treat at-risk individuals or where their families seek health services.

Through Briefing Trainings, Department personnel were trained as to the purpose of the program and were instructed how to identify and enroll new members. Personnel were trained to ensure that digital photographs were taken at the scene that could be attached to the enrollment application for the program. This assisted personnel in creating "Missing Person" fliers that can be disturbed quickly to field personnel or media by hard copy and in an electronic format. Enrollment by field personnel as a result of a radio call for service has been one of the main sources of new enrollment. .

Families and caregivers have been very responsive to the program and have expressed appreciation for the proactive approach to a growing problem. The *Return Home Registry* has also provided an opportunity to establish a partnership between the Police Department and a greater segment of the City's at-risk population. During the enrollment process officers and personnel have an opportunity to interact and build a newfound trust with participants and their family members. The officers also have had the opportunity to learn more about these medical conditions and symptoms that may be exhibited in order to better understand and be responsive to their needs.

While handling calls for service and enrolling persons at-risk, field personnel have had the opportunity to identify circumstances where proper care was not being exercised toward elderly and developmental disabled persons. Once identified, they utilize resources such as Adult Protective Services and other mental health services to improve care and living conditions for these persons.

In recognizing that the program would only be truly successful if it reached outside of Irvine's borders, the last several months have been used to reach other law enforcement agencies. *Return Home Registry* personnel constructed folders and compact discs that contained the needed information to initiate the program in other agencies. These items included: Micro Access based RHR software, RHR registration forms, PowerPoint presentations for training dispatch and patrol personnel, the Irvine Police Department policy as it pertains to RHR, and a training bulletin for field personnel in addition to other helpful items.

Irvine Police Department personnel has also partnered with the local and regional Crime Prevention organizations to present training to personnel from outside agencies. This training was performed at no-cost.

Assessment:

The results of the *Return Home Registry* program have been positive. To date, 167 individuals have enrolled in the program and 36 persons have been located using the *Return Home Registry*. In several of the incidents where persons were reunited with their families, the subject previously wandered away from his/her family or caretaker. In these incidents, field personnel were provided with photographs and locations the subject had been known to frequent which expedited their safe return.

Some of the factors used to evaluate the use and success of the program are the Department's Daily Logs and reviewing *Return Home Registry* forms that were submitted. Members of the

RHR staff also monitored calls for service to ensure personnel were properly enrolling and utilizing the program when there were opportunities. Some of the challenges encountered with the program have been ensuring field personnel are accurately completing the *Return Home Registry* registration forms and in assisting other agencies implementing their programs at their agencies.

One of the measures that were established to monitor use of the program was a software application that recorded each time the database was accessed by personnel. During the first year the program was tested the database was accessed approximately 100 times.

Upon additional funding, a countywide database will be developed whereby registrants could be accessed by participating agencies on a secure server. The implementation of this website will greatly assist in the successful application of this program countywide and possibly statewide in the near future.

Agency and Officer Information:

Key Project Team Members: Troy Gielish – Patrol Sergeant
Kim Cherney – Crime Prevention
Patsy Lovell – Dispatch Supervisor

Project Contact Person: Troy Gielish
Sergeant – RHR Administrator
1 Civic Center Plaza
Irvine, CA 92623
(949) 795-2967
(949) 724-7077
tgielish@ci.irvine.ca.us

1. Autism Society of America:
“The prevalence of autism had risen to 1 in every 150 American children, and almost 1 in 94 boys. The issuance of this report caused a media uproar, but the news was not a surprise to ASA or to the 1.5 million Americans living with the effects of autism spectrum disorder”

Alzheimer’s Association of Orange County
“Over the next 20 years, the number of Californians living with Alzheimer’s disease will double, affecting all race, ethnic groups and regions of the state.”
“588,208 families in California living with Alzheimer’s disease.”

Down Syndrome Society of Orange County
“Down syndrome is the most common chromosomal abnormality, occurring in approximately 1 in 900 births.”