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*Speaker Bill Howell Works Closely With
The Virginia Sheriffs' Association*

Hospital Makes Sizeable Donation To PROJECT LIFESAVER

KATHLEEN CAREY, PIO



Debbie Atkinson, Riverside Health System Foundation Executive Director, presents Sheriff Gabe Morgan and Lieutenant Maria Moore with a \$36,000 check for Project Lifesaver.

For the second time, Riverside Health System Foundation, Inc., has offered resounding support for the Project Lifesaver Program. The first time was in 2002 when the foundation gave the Newport News Sheriff's Office \$35,000 in start-up money for the search and rescue program. Now, in 2008, the foundation has granted \$36,000 to pay for equipment upgrades and to increase equipment inventory.

"This is a lot of money," said Sheriff Gabe Morgan smiling. "It shows that Riverside is fully committed to the community. This ongoing partnership will allow us to enhance Project Lifesaver to better serve our current clients and reach out to additional families in need."

Project Lifesaver is a search and rescue program that provides peace of mind to the caregiver of people diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, autism, Down syndrome and other mentally related disorders. With Project Lifesaver, caregivers can have confidence that their loved one will be found safely and in a timely manner should they wander and get lost.

It works by applying state-of-the-art technology. Every at-risk client is provided with a bracelet that looks much like a wristwatch. Inside is a tiny

transmitter with a code unique to that individual. If they are to wander away from their family, a team of trained and certified Newport News Deputy Sheriffs will mobilize.

Search times have been significantly lowered. Research shows without Project Lifesaver, an average search takes nine hours. The average search and rescue with Project Lifesaver is 30 minutes.

The Newport News Sheriff's Office is helping to bring loved ones home. Riverside Health System Foundation, Inc., is providing the funding to make it so.

Parents Kelly and Dana Musick were overcome with fear and panic when their 11-year-old daughter, who has Down syndrome, took off at the beach. Virginia Beach was hosting the 15th Annual North American Sand Soccer Championship. There were an estimated 9,600 athletes, hundreds of spectators, thousands of other beachgoers and miles and miles of beach. Kelsey Musick just disappeared in a flash. No one saw whether she went toward the



Darcy Perry, President of the Kiwanis Club Denbigh, presented Master Deputy Audrey Baxter, Project Lifesaver Coordinator, with a \$250 check.

water, down the beach or toward the parking lot and busy street.

"We set up our blanket, beach umbrella and chairs," recalled Dana. "Our two year old went running toward the water. I got up to grab him. I turned around and Kelsey was no where in sight."

Dana didn't waste a moment. She dialed the Sheriff's Office Project Lifesaver 24-hour hotline. Deputies responded like superheroes in a Marvel comic. "I am glad they found her before we had to deploy our equipment," said Lieutenant Maria Moore of the happy ending. "But we were ready." There were five marked units with their trunks up and tracking receivers in the hands of each Deputy when word came that Kelsey turned up at a lifeguard station six blocks from where she started.

"Six blocks! This isn't about bad parenting," said Lieutenant Moore. "This is about a mental disorder that tends to lead to wandering. And this little girl walked fast. We don't judge Mom and Dad for not having eyes in the back of their heads."

The Musicks don't want to deprive their daughter of activities enjoyed by her younger brothers. A small two-ounce transmitter is what makes the difference between staying at home and experiencing the world. Dana said of her daughter Kelsey, "She knows the rule. We drill it into her all the time. 'What's the No. 1 rule?,' we'll ask. She'll say 'Stay with mommy.' But she doesn't put it together."

People diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease also lack the cognitive skill to recognize danger. They may not be clear of mind, but they can be physically nimble. Just ask Elizabeth Tharpe, married to 64-year-old Edward Tharpe. "He can no longer drive unless I'm in the car too." Because he is still in the early stages of the illness, Mrs. Tharpe can't bare to completely take away his freedom of driving privileges. But after one wrong turn sent Edward on a road trip that crossed through four states, it was time to find some boundaries.

The local news media splashed Edward Tharpe's photo across the TV, Web and newspaper. A plea went out that if anyone saw this missing man to call police. One spotter called from a gas station in South Carolina. Refueled and ready to hit the highway, Tharpe continued his journey. He ended up asleep at the wheel in southwestern Virginia near the Tennessee/North Carolina borders. "I knew I was in the wrong place when I saw all the mountains around me," explained Edward. "I wasn't scared, I just wanted to get back."

Now home safely from a dangerous adventure, he and his wife agreed that Project Lifesaver was their best option.

The \$36,000 Riverside grant will help expand the program to include more clientele. At any given time, the Sheriff's Office has 25 to 30 people on the



Kelsey Musick, Project Lifesaver client, is all smiles at home.

program. They would like to see that number increase to 60.

The grant money will also pay for improved technology. Currently, the transmitters used by the Sheriff's Office have one radio frequency which can experience interference, especially in inclement weather. The newest equipment has three frequencies, which should eliminate any interference.

Most of the Newport News Sheriff's Office at-risk clients have Alzheimer's or autism. Mentally related disorders do not discriminate based on age. Recent years have seen a drastic rise in childhood autism. There is also a climb in Alzheimer's. The number of people with Alzheimer's is projected to rise steadily in the coming decades as the proportion of elderly people in the U.S. population increases.

According to the Center's for Disease Control, there are currently more than 4.5 million Alzheimer's patients. Other studies conclude that almost 2.7 million will wander off from their place of residence. Of those 2.7 million, 2 million are habitual wanderers.

After 24 hours of being lost, the chance of survival drops to 46% with most being found within a mile radius from where they were last seen, according to the Virginia Department of Emergency Management.

The Newport News Sheriff's Office is the only agency in the Hampton Roads region to offer this program FREE of charge to clients. Program costs are met through donations. "We believe that mothers and fathers raising an autistic child have enough stressors in life," explained Sheriff Morgan. "We believe that husbands and wives taking care of a spouse struck with Alzheimer's are burdened enough. They shouldn't have to worry about how to pay for a safety net. It is because of the generosity of corporations, civic groups and individuals that we can offer Project Lifesaver free. For that, I say 'thank you.'"