

WANDERING:
RESCUING MISSING PERSONS WITH DEMENTIA

InvestigateWest Story Brief
April 2013



SPOKANE VALLEY, WASH.

I. The Case of Sam Counts

On the afternoon of November 23, 2012, Sam Counts left his home on E. 9th Avenue in Spokane Valley to pick up bread from the grocery store. He had just gotten back Christmas shopping with his wife of 45 years, now also his caretaker. Counts, 71, had been diagnosed with dementia. He was still very much present, says his daughter, Sue Belote, also of Spokane. He would call her on the phone, and she would go visit him several times a week, hanging on to normalcy before the dementia progressed further. The doctor had said it was ok to drive, as long as someone else was in the car with him. On this Friday, Counts got into his white 2012 Kia alone.

He never made it to the store. Three hours after left home, his family reported him missing.

On Saturday morning, alerts started to go out on local websites as well as radio and news outlets reporting versions of the same story: a local man missing, trim, six feet tall, last seen in a red and black jacket, jeans and white tennis shoes. A description of car and its license plate number was included. Counts' family filed a report with the Spokane County Sheriff's Office.

At 9:28 A.M. on November 24, KHQ Local News reported:

There was a possible sighting of Sam at a Dollar Store in Argonne Village on Saturday morning. An employee there said a man matching Sam's description walked in and seemed disoriented. A manager at McDonalds believes she saw him on Sullivan. Sam's family thinks it is possible that he got separated from his car.

Over five frantic days, with the help of the Spokane County Sheriff's Office, friends and family led a search for the former Air Force Master Sergeant that spanned parts of three states. They enlisted the help of a family friend who worked for the Spokane transit system to flyer local buses and the help of former colleagues of Counts' in postal service to put up missing photos in post

offices. In the meantime, the family faced critics who asked why he was allowed to get into the car alone, why he didn't have a cell phone.

Finally, running out of options, the Sheriff's office deployed a helicopter. It was Thursday, November 29. An air support unit aboard Air1, a chopper equipped with sophisticated thermal imaging set out to look for Counts' vehicle in remote Spokane County. The first day the search was unsuccessful. In 2009, the unit received training with on-the-ground deputies in the Rapid Response System, which tracks radio frequencies in bracelets worn by Alzheimer's patients to find those who go wandering. But Counts was not wearing such a bracelet, and when the helicopter went back up on Friday, it was a search mission, but it would not be a rescue.



ELK, WASH.

On November 30, Air1 located Count's car in Elk, Wash., "in the area of 29303 N. Blanchard. Counts was not inside. After an on-the-ground search by officers and a team of bloodhounds, his body was found, roughly a half-mile away. The autopsy report from the medical examiner's office would lay out in blunt, detailed terms the tragedy that had unfolded: "The jeans are heavily mud-caked," "The right-coin pocket contain miscellaneous change totaling \$2.05," "a flashlight was in the vicinity of the decedent," "The decedent had removed his jacket, hat, eyeglasses, T-shirt, and sport-shirt."

The decedent is a 71-year-old male who had been missing for approximately one week. He was discovered when his vehicle was sighted by helicopter and a ground search was performed in a rural Spokane area. It appeared as if the vehicle was stuck in the mud and the decedent had continued approximately 1/4 mile down a hill, with items of personal property found between the car and the decedent (including his jacket). The decedent had a history of short-term memory loss from early stages of dementia. Autopsy is authorized by the Spokane County Medical Examiner's Office for further investigation of the death.

AUTOPSY REPORT

If the Saturday sighting was correct, it's possible that Sam Counts took North Argonne Road north across the Spokane River. He might have turned left on Route 206 and driven past a baseball field. He almost certainly ended up on Route 2 and took the exit for North Elk Chattaroy Road, following its twists and turns up into the mountains toward Mt. Spokane State Park. Just over

thirty miles from home, maybe he car got stuck in the mud. Disoriented, he got out of his car. On the night of Saturday, November 24, a fog settled over Elk, Wash., and a 5 M.P.H. wind from blew from the southwest. The temperature dropped to 27 degrees.

II. A History of Missing Incidents

Over the last five-plus years, at least ten persons with dementia have died in Washington State as a direct result of wandering, seven in the last 16 months, based an analysis of media reports and interviews with law enforcement by InvestigateWest and KCTS. The exact number is unknown; no public record is automatically created when wandering is a contributing factor to death, and no state agency keeps such a tally.

The ten wandering incidents show few patterns. Most were male and most were on foot. Last Oct. 1, an 80-year-old man was missing for 45 days before his body was found at the bottom of an embankment less than half a mile from the memory center he had wandered off from. Search and Rescue volunteers from Skagit and Snohomish counties, using used horses, dogs, helicopters, thermal cameras, boats and hydroplanes had not found him before the official search was called off. This past January, a 76-year-old man in Ronald, Wash., was found in a snow bank less than 12 hours after he was reported missing. He was taken by ambulance to the hospital, where he died from exposure and possible hypothermia. Later that month, neighbors in Anacortes reported an elderly man missing after they had not seen him for several days. After two days of searching by the local police department, his body was in a wooded, wetland area not far from where he lived.

Over the same period of time, there have been 27 confirmed media reports of persons with dementia who have been found safe. In each of those cases, law enforcement became involved either as a result of a missing persons report filed by family or a caretaker, or when alerted to unusual behavior by a member of the public. It is almost certain that countless other cases were not reported to the police, not reported in the media, or both.

Interviews with many of the police departments that responded to these cases over the past several years suggest that the procedures for handling a missing persons case that involves dementia is inconsistent. In Anacortes, a city of just under 16,000 people in Skagit County, officers on the small police force have all received training using International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) Alzheimer's Initiative materials. Police Chief Bonnie Bowers can speak at length about the details of the case, and how an investigation proceeds. Anacortes also has an active Project Lifesaver program in place through the hospital guild, one a handful of similar programs designed to facilitate search and rescue of wanderers. In Spokane, facing a person in a vehicle rather than someone on foot, the police department appears to have issued a "be on the lookout" alert and instructed patrol officers to search parking garages and other facilities when not on a call. It is not clear if officers in the Spokane County Sheriff's Office have received formal training in missing persons with dementia cases or if there is a written policy. We are expecting a response from the Seattle Police Department this week on those same questions about policies and procedures, both in general and as regards the case of Sherman Davis, 79, who went missing from an independent living facility in Seattle in September 2012 and was found dead on a logging road in Oregon's Willamette Valley a month later.

It is not clear in any of these cases that the deceased was using either the Safe Return or Project Lifesaver programs which would, with some likelihood, have increased their chances of being found safely.

IACP's Alzheimer's INITIATIVES   www.theiacp.org/alzheimers	Washington 
CONSIDER THESE STATISTICS THAT WILL IMPACT YOUR COMMUNITY: <p>An estimated 5.4 million Americans are living with Alzheimer's disease and currently someone develops the disease every 69 seconds. With the aging population, as many as 16 million people will have this debilitating disease by 2050.</p> <p>Over 60% of Alzheimer's patients will wander or become lost and seven out of ten people with Alzheimer's live at home.</p>	STATE ALERTING SYSTEM: ENDANGERED MISSING PERSON ADVISORY PLAN <p>Run by: Washington State Patrol, Missing Persons Unit</p> <p>For criteria for issuing this alert go to: tinyurl.com/WA-Alert</p>

ALZHEIMER'S INITIATIVE TIP SHEET: WASHINGTON

III. Best Practices for Law Enforcement

Since 2009, the federal Bureau of Justice Assistance has funded the IACP Alzheimer's Initiative to provide support and education for law enforcement around Alzheimer's. There is an explicit recognition by Initiative staff that their work is around preparedness: Alzheimer's is a coming burden for law enforcement and getting ready now will benefit law enforcement and make them more efficient when the time comes that they need this information. Many departments that have received training and education to date have been proactive, but overall the level of training and preparedness of law enforcement agencies is all over the map, according to interviews with Initiative staff.

IACP recommends that police departments adopt a written policy specifically for persons with dementia, and they provide a sample policy that agencies can use or adapt. The reason they give is that the population of PWD is very different from those with mental illness and the policy required is different too from the missing children policies that are already ubiquitous. IACP also conducts daylong trainings around the country—five are scheduled in May and June from Oregon to New Jersey. They have not yet done any training in Washington. One significant complaint from IACP is that there is little consistency in law enforcement procedures from jurisdiction to jurisdiction and from state to state. A draft of a best practices report and manual is written and currently under review; it's expected to be released in May or June of this year.

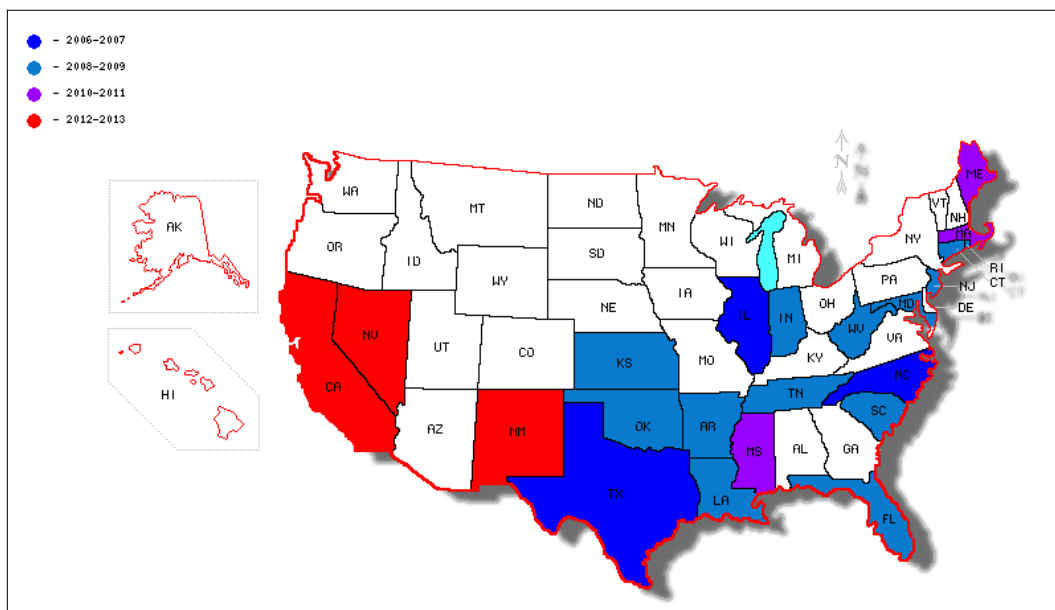
There is also a body of academic work looking at issues around wandering, but it is limited by the lack of actual data available to researchers about outcomes in missing persons with dementia cases. The index of cases that has been developed for this story is the first of its kind of Washington, to the best of our knowledge. Nevertheless, there seems to be an emerging consensus around

several principles. First, missing persons with dementia exhibit a predictable and unique set of behaviors that can help inform search and rescue efforts. Second, designing effective public policy on this issue is difficult because of the desire to extend autonomy to individuals for as long as possible and the false sense of safety that such policies might create. Third, none of the three main safe-return systems have been evaluated to determine if they actually return PWD to safety. Fourth, training and education for law enforcement is critical for positive outcomes.

IV. Silver Alert

While missing persons alert programs covered the elderly and persons with dementia, the first so-called Silver Alert legislation was passed in Illinois in 2006. It was sponsored by a state legislature with two aunts living with Alzheimer's and appears to have been supported by the state chapter of the Alzheimer's Association. That legislation set a precedent—and established a pattern—that would see 22 states Silver Alert programs in just eight years. While some parameters of the legislation vary from state to state, the core features are strikingly similar: the missing person is 65 or older; all local resources have been tapped; law enforcement believes the missing person is in danger, often as a result of dementia; and there is information that will be useful in search and rescue if it is shared with the public.

The IACP does not take an official position on Silver Alert legislation, however they point out two potential benefits. The first is the coordinating role of such a system, which defines how law enforcement agencies can work together on these cases. The second, and potentially more important, is that it allows the activation of many more resources when local law enforcement has done all it can do. This may get the highway patrol involved, using highway signs or billboards, using reverse 911 or other local emergency alert systems, activating a 'be on the lookout' (BOLO) alert to neighboring jurisdictions, etc. To the extent that such coordination and sharing of resources is already in place, the effect of Silver Alert legislation may be limited.



SPREAD OF SILVER ALERT LEGISLATION

It also looks like the legislation in many states is somewhat symbolic. Many of the bills are brief, with few oversight requirements. There is at times a sympathetic individual, such as a relative of a lawmaker, who endorses the legislation and lobbies for its passage. While state law enforcement gets involved when a Silver Alert is activated, local law enforcement will ultimately close the case. In almost no cases is information about the closed case shared to record whether the missing person was found safe or whether the alert played a definitive role. In Florida, one of the few states with reporting requirements, a study of missing drivers with dementia found the Silver Alert to be useful in 23.7 percent of cases, usually a BOLO alert law enforcement officers in the field.

The proposed legislation in Washington State derives its text in part directly from Alzheimer's Association statistics: "Approximately sixty percent of individuals with dementia will wander at least once and that if not found within twenty-four hours, up to half of wandering seniors with dementia will suffer serious injury or death." The scope of the system is as narrow as any in the country; an alert would only be issued for a person over the age of 65 for whom there is written documentation of mental impairment. Notably, the bill does not allocate any new money to law enforcement. Participation would be voluntary for law enforcement, other state agencies, and media outlets, and the plan would be developed "within existing resources."