

Across the River

JALC hosts Child Abuse Prevention Month conference

BY ALEXIS BARRETT,
TAYJON BUMPHUS |
THE SUN
ABARRETT@PADUCAHSUN.COM

CARTERVILLE, Ill. — The Southern Region Child Abuse Prevention Committee held a conference Thursday afternoon at John A. Logan College, commemorating Child Abuse Prevention Month and raising awareness about child abuse in the region.

Child Abuse Prevention Month is observed

every April since President Ronald Reagan's 1983 proclamation, with communities planting pinwheels and tying ribbons in observance.

The Thursday event featured several organizations — including Prevent Child Abuse Illinois, the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, and the Poshard Foundation for Abused Children — as well as multiple guest speakers.

"This year's theme,

Pinwheels of Possibility, reminds us that when we support families early and invest in prevention, we strengthen parents, reduce stress, and create the conditions for children to thrive," Prevent Child Abuse Illinois Executive Director Tarra Winters wrote in a press release ahead of the event.

"The need is strong. We have a tendency to feel that it's always happening somewhere

else," said Jo Poshard, the executive director of the Poshard Foundation for Abused Children. "Our rates in southern Illinois are higher than per capita rates in the state."

"Research shows one person can change the life of a child," Poshard said. "A teacher, a neighbor, a friend — just one person. And so people need to be aware, 'Maybe I'm that one person for a child.'"



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Project Lifesaver aids with location when 'time is of the essence'

BY TERRA TEMPLE |
FOR THE SUN
TTEMPLE@METROPOLIS
PLANET.COM

While it may look old-school, it's worth its weight in gold to families who are missing a loved one.

Massac County Sheriff's Office became part of the Project Lifesaver organization after such an incident.

It was three years ago when a family whose small son is autistic left their well-secured house.

"We had an incident where he slipped out one day, and he ended up close to a pond a quarter mile away from the house. It was at that time we decided to do something," said Jori DeNeve, an investigator with the sheriff's department, who is over its Project Lifesaver program. "He's our first client, and we've been very successful with him. We've developed a relationship and rapport with him and his family through this. It's really been helpful in his case."

Project Lifesaver was founded in 1999 by the 43rd Virginia Search Rescue. According to its website, projectlifesaver.org, the program was strategically designed for "at-risk" individuals who are prone to the life-threatening behavior of wandering due to autism, Alzheimer's disease, dementia or other cognitive conditions. Its primary mission is to provide a timely response that saves lives and reduces the potential injury of adults and children with the propensity to wander due to a cognitive condition.

During its 25-year history, more than 4,581 rescues have been performed in more than 1,600 U.S. communities, eight Canadian provinces and in Australia. Project Lifesaver is a 501(c)(3) community-based non-profit organization that works with sheriff's departments, police departments, fire departments, search and rescue organizations, VA hospitals and nursing homes. Certified Project Lifesaver agencies have reduced search time recoveries to an average of 30 minutes, which is 95% less time than standard search and rescue operations.

"It's very beneficial for people who are autistic or have dementia," DeNeve said. "We will not put it on someone who is unruly. It's got to be a medical issue — primarily, older folks with dementia or kids with mental issues, autism."

Those who have a family member who would



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Massac County Sheriff's deputy Harvey Baxter adjusts the range on the Project Lifesaver receiver during a training exercise. The device tracks a radio frequency transmitter worn by the client, triangulating the direction of the signal in order to locate them.

benefit from Project Lifesaver can contact the sheriff's department at 618-524-2912 to learn more about or enroll in the program.

"They have to meet the requirements," DeNeve emphasized, noting the department will assist with the paperwork. "They're normally fitted that day."

The client is fitted with a transmitter that goes on the wrist or ankle. There is no cost to the client, unless something happens to the transmitter while it's in their care, "that is their responsibility," DeNeve noted, adding the cost of batteries, equipment and maintenance is covered by the sheriff's department. "It is our goal to keep these individuals who are at risk safe; if that costs the sheriff's department, then so be it."

The transmitter is assigned to the client. It emits a tracking signal on an individually assigned FM radio frequency. The signal emits every second, 24 hours a day. The transmitter is water-resistant and worn 24/7. Batteries are replaced by the sheriff's department every 30 to 60 days.

The transmitter bracelet is "very little, not cumbersome," said Harvey Baxter, one deputy who's Project Lifesaver trained. "The key issue — as soon as you think someone is missing, contact us. We don't want to wait. Time is of the essence. As soon as we get the call, we're on the way."

The sheriff's department has two receivers and at least one Project Lifesaver-trained deputy assigned per shift. DeNeve noted the receiver "looks old-fashion" because of the frequencies used. She described it as being "more like a ham radio style fre-

quency," as it uses specific bands for location. According to projectlifesaver.org, locator systems that solely rely on GPS aren't as reliable as basic radio frequency technology because anything that can block sunlight can block GPS signals, including the client's own body if they're somehow covering the unit.

DeNeve and Chief Deputy Danny McHaney are the department's Project Lifesaver instructors. The receiver boxes are available to any deputy and remain in the squad room area, "so they can come and get it if need be," DeNeve said.

Project Lifesaver operators go through training exercises to stay up on the skill. DeNeve noted that, depending on the location, those exercises can actually be more difficult than locating a person.

"When we're in an open field, and someone's wearing [the transmitter], you can see them. Whereas, when it's just the transmitter, it's more of an Easter egg hunt," she said.

Baxter described the training as hide-and-seek. "Out here, [DeNeve] will put it behind something, and you've got to scan [with your eyes] up and down. When you turn [the receiver] on, you'll hear a slight beep, but once you get closer [to the transmitter], it starts getting louder. It's a sonar that goes anywhere from close range to long range. It's very accurate. It reminds me of a Geiger counter. It's really basic," he said.

But what it's able to do is "keep everybody safe. We have a lot of people who have autism or dementia. This is peace of mind," Baxter said.

Along with training on the receiver and learning how to replace the transmitter battery, Project

Lifesaver operators are also specially trained in the methods of communicating with those for whom the device was made. According to projectlifesaver.org, once located, the missing person will be disoriented, anxious and untrusting, so operators are trained on how to approach the person, gain their trust and put them at ease for the trip back home.

Because Project Lifesaver is an international organization, clients' families can check with authorities when they're going on vacation to see if the program is available in case of emergency. "A lot of your major cities have this, but we don't do the checking with local authorities," Baxter said. Locally, the sheriff's departments in Johnson, Williamson and Union counties in Illinois and in McCracken and Graves counties in



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To keep from detecting other items in this high-tech world, the Project Lifesaver receiver and transmitter use radio frequencies. The transmitter, shown in the packet, is worn on the client's wrist or ankle.



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The Massac County Sheriff's Office became involved in the Project Lifesaver program three years ago. The device box is kept in the squad room, providing access to trained personnel, of whom there is one on every shift.

Kentucky are part of the program, according to its website.

"Normally when you're on vacation, you've got an eye on everybody, but there's always that 'what if,'" Baxter said.

And that's one reason why Project Lifesaver was created. Its website relates that 1 in 59 school-aged children has an autism diagnosis, and another 6,000 are born yearly with Down syndrome — almost all are fearless in wandering to new places, unaware of

their surroundings and the dangers involved, especially as many are drawn to water sources, while also having limited communication abilities.

"It's just another tool in the toolbox," said Massac County EMA director Brian Horn, who is also Project Lifesaver trained.

"It's better to have it and not need it than to need it and not have it," Baxter added.

"Unfortunately events do happen. This is another way to help," DeNeve said.

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