

First Responders (Law Enforcement & EMS)

Public Safety Officials and First Responders have a vital role to play in keeping people living with dementia safe in the community. First responders are more likely to encounter individuals living with dementia in crisis or emergency situations. In fact, the majority of people living with dementia are living in the community rather than a long-term care facility.



What is Dementia?

Dementia is an overall term that describes a wide range of symptoms associated with a decline in memory or other thinking skills severe enough to reduce a person's ability to perform everyday activities. Dementia has many causes. Alzheimer's disease, the most common cause of dementia, is a disease of the brain that leads to changes with memory, thinking, and behavior. Alzheimer's and other dementias are not a normal part of aging.

Early signs of Dementia

- Memory loss that disrupts daily life
- Challenges in planning or solving problems
- Difficulty completing familiar tasks at home, at work or at leisure
- Confusion with time or place
- Trouble understanding visual images and spatial relationships
- New problems with words in speaking or writing
- Misplacing things and losing the ability to retrace steps
- Decreased or poor judgment
- Withdrawal from work or social activities
- Changes in mood and personality

Dementia-Friendly Communication

- Treat the person with dignity and respect.
- Speak slowly and clearly. Use a gentle and relaxed tone.
- Use shorter simple sentences, and ask one question at a time.
- Avoid arguing with or embarrassing the person.
- Encourage nonverbal communication.
- Patiently wait for a response while the person takes time to process what you said, about 20 seconds.
- Approach the person slowly and from the front, never from behind so they are less likely to be surprised or startled.
- Be aware of your body language: smile and make eye contact at eye-level.
- Seek to understand the person's reality and feelings.
- Apologize and redirect to another environment or topic as needed.

Why does this matter to Public Safety Officials and First Responders?

Here are a few examples of common scenarios which may involve a person living with dementia:

- Walk out of a store with items they forgot to pay for and face charges of shoplifting.
- Become lost or get into an accident due to erratic driving.
- Fail to obey street signs, traffic lights or speed limits. If the person is involved in an accident, he or she may flee the scene, unaware of personal injuries or property damage.
- Call 911 thinking a misplaced item has been stolen.
- Forget to turn things off such as the oven or gas or to put out a cigarette.
- Unable to detect smoke or a fire and evacuate in a timely manner.
- Loss of executive function may lead to socially inappropriate behavior such as indecent exposure.
- Wander or become lost, even in familiar settings.
- Become victims of financial abuse by paid caregivers or family members who take advantage of their diminished cognitive capacity.
- Become confused about how things work or where they are.
- Behavioral symptoms such as aggression can result in acts of domestic violence.
- Calls from caregivers/family members that have a loved with dementia who has become agitated, dangerous, or defiant or other in-home scenarios such as falls.
- A person living with dementia may be at a higher risk in extreme temperatures. They may be more likely to get dehydrated or to wear too many clothes in hot weather, and they may be at risk for hypothermia in cold weather.

Dementia Friendly Tips for First Responders

Interacting with a first responder can make people with dementia fearful, confused, or agitated. Here are a few tips to help with the interaction:

- Introduce yourself. Make sure they know they are not in trouble. If possible, wear something other than your uniform to be as least intimidating as possible. Show your identifying badge if they question you.
- Speak slowly, in a non-threatening way. Avoid asking too many questions at once.
- Continue to reassure the person that they are safe and that you are there to help them. Remind them they are not in trouble.
- If called to a home and you suspect the person with dementia may be hallucinating or seeing things that aren't there, reassure them that you have checked the home and they are safe.
- If the individual is wandering, try to locate identifying information to call or locate a friend or family member for help.
- Ensure the person is connected to long-term assistance before you leave the scene.
- Look for an ID/Medical bracelet.
- Reduce distractions whenever possible- turn off lights/sounds/radios and move to a quieter location if possible.

Dementia-Specific Suggested Programs

Programs such as [Project Lifesaver](#) and [Project SafeReturn](#) can be housed in the sheriff's office or local police department. These programs offer a means for faster recovery of someone living with dementia who has been reported missing. A transmitter is provided for the person to wear that can be traced and located by mobile equipment housed with law enforcement. A few communities in Iowa have Project Lifesaver Programs.

Law enforcement officers and other first responders should be encouraged to receive ongoing dementia-specific training. To prevent reoccurring incidents, communities should promote the existence of Silver Alert and connect with the aging and disability resource center, adult protective services agency and county crisis response agency to determine a follow-up protocol once an individual has been located and returned home.

Law enforcement can create a voluntary registry for individuals living with dementia. The registry provides the name, home address and contact information for family members should the individual living with dementia become involved with law enforcement. [File of Life](#) is a program that places a packet of information for use by first responders and other emergency personnel inside or outside the door of a residence or prominently displayed on the refrigerator. This file contains information critical to crisis response, including emergency contacts and important medical information. Individuals can also contact their 911 center and have information added to their residential file indicating to first responders that there is someone at the residence living with dementia or brain change.

Support Employee Care Partners

- Take a holistic approach to employee well-being.
- Create an organization-wide understanding of the challenges care partners face.
- Help employees connect to available community resources and benefits available.
- Gather detailed information about the kind of leave policies, benefits and programs employers have in place to support care partners.
- Establish policies and practices supportive to care partners.
- Measure how well your support is working by surveying employees.

Additional Resources

- **Dementia Friendly Iowa** | <https://dementiafriendlyiowa.org/>
- **Dementia Friendly America- First Responder Video** | <https://www.dfamerica.org/sector-videos/>
- **Alzheimer's Society UK: Dementia-friendly Emergency Services Guide**
https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/sites/defaultfiles/2019-11/Dementia%20Friendly%20Emergency%20Services_Guide.pdf
- **Project LifeSaver** | <https://projectlifesaver.org/>

Law Enforcement

- **International Association of Chiefs of Police-Alzheimer's Training Center**
<https://www.theiacp.org/alzheimers-training-center>
- **US Department of Justice- Alzheimer's Aware: A Guide for Implementing a Law Enforcement Program to Address Alzheimer's in the Community**
<https://bja.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh186/files/Publications/AlzheimersAware.pdf>
- **Alzheimer's Association: Safe Return**
https://www.alz.org/national/documents/safereturn_lawenforcement.pdf
- **Medic Alert L.E.A.P**
<https://www.medicalert.org/leap>

First Responders

- **National Council of Certified Dementia Practitioners: Law Enforcement Training and First Responders**
<https://www.nccdp.org/lawenforcement.htm>
- **Alzheimer's Orange County: Police and First Responders Training Videos**
<https://www.alzoc.org/professionals/training/>
- **Alzheimer Society of Canada: I am a First Responder**
<https://alzheimer.ca/en/help-support/im-first-responder>
- **Alzheimer's Association: First Responders**
<https://www.alz.org/professionals/first-responders>



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