



Janae Holland, center, CID clerk at the Wood County Sheriff's Department, operates the receiver to locate a PLI bracelet as her trainer, Deputy Brenda Reeves, right, instructs. Kathy Smith, left, Van Zandt County Crime Stoppers/Sheriff's Department volunteer, watches.

Erasing the Vanishing Point

DAILY BULLETINS SPILL FROM NEWSPAPERS, televisions, stereos and social media feeds, alerting us to people “gone missing.” The story is the same: One minute they were there; the next—gone.

In the case of a missing child, law enforcement agencies issue Amber Alerts. And now, ever more frequently, Silver Alerts sound the alarm for missing senior citizens. In Texas, Amber Alerts and Silver Alerts, as well as Endangered Missing Persons Alerts, are all transmitted by law-enforcement agencies within their own communications channels and also to the public.

Beyond abductions, there is a vulnerable subset of the population for whom these alerts were also designed. Some adults and children are prone to “wandering,” including those with cognitive disabilities such as Down syndrome; Asperger’s syndrome; traumatic brain injury; autism; epilepsy; and dementia resulting from stroke, head injury, or Parkinson’s, Lewy body and Alzheimer’s diseases.

In the above cases, these people will wander or even bolt from a safe and supervised place, many times right into a very dangerous or hazardous situation. Left without reasoning

skills to keep them safe, these victims may stray outside into an extreme weather condition without adequate clothing or protection. Or they may travel to a busy traffic intersection. And all too often, they can be drawn to bodies of water that pose a drowning threat, or they may even scale tall structures that can pose falling risks. When these at-risk individuals become lost, time is of the essence.

These situations are extremely dangerous for the wanderer, and they are also tremendously stressful for parents and caregivers. Circumstances like these also burden and strain emergency management systems, as law enforcement and other rescue workers are called in to search for missing individuals with countless boots on the ground, canines, mounted patrols, and even aerial and water patrols. In any missing-person search, the first moments and hours are critical. The longer a search goes on, the less likely it becomes that a person with diminished capacity will be found unharmed or even alive.

In this age of technology, there’s been marked progress in reducing the length of these dangerous and frightening events. There are now even electronic monitors that can thwart an

event before it ever becomes a search situation. One of the more widely used and effective programs was developed by Project Lifesaver International, or PLI. This organization has trained and works directly with public safety agencies across the nation. It also provides training in search and rescue, and in the use of their electronic locating equipment. PLI is headquartered in Virginia but is administered by local agencies across the nation. More than 1,400 agencies such as police, fire and rescue, and other public safety departments are registered to provide tracking bracelets and perform the search-and-rescue functions.

In the program, people at risk of wandering, whom PLI calls clients, are outfitted with a watch-like radio frequency transmitter that emits a unique signal, similar to the locator in an aircraft's "black box." Once functional, the unit emits an inaudible pulse every second. There's no tracking involved unless the wearer becomes lost. Then, to search, trained rescue workers outfitted with specialized equipment travel to the site where the client was last seen.

The search equipment includes a multidirectional antenna with a receiver. The latter is dialed in to the unique channel of the bracelet assigned to the client. The antenna, when mounted on a vehicle roof, can pick up a signal within 1 square mile, or ¼ mile away in any direction. When airborne, that distance expands to 3 to 7 miles. Once a signal is strong and the rescuers get closer, they switch from mobile units to handheld ones.

These units use time-tested radio frequency, or RF, because it's been proved to be more reliable than the Global Positioning System, or GPS, for precision tracking. GPS only offers general location information. RF can dial in regardless of the presence of dense foliage, metal coverings, buildings or inclement weather. Also, RF is not reliant on a strong cellular signal.

Since 2008, Brenda Reeves, reserve Wood County deputy, has been Wood County's PLI program administrator. In 1990, Reeves was Mineola's first female police officer and went on to become an emergency medical technician and firefighter. With her years of first responder work, she has seen firsthand the need for PLI.

"In the nine years that I have been the Project Lifesaver administrator, it's become a passion for me," Reeves says. "We've had over 40 clients since I've taken over the program, and I've grown very close to every single one of them. It is comforting to me to know that although the bracelet can't stop the problem, we do have something in place to help find them, should they become lost."

As the administrator of the program, Reeves visits each client every 30 days to remove the bracelet, replace the battery, and make sure it is in good working order. The bracelets are waterproof, so once on, the client wears it until Reeves' next maintenance visit.

The county has five clients, with four of those being elderly and one a child. But the county has 25 bracelets that were generously funded in a joint project of the three Wood County Pilot Clubs in Mineola, Quitman and Winnsboro. "There are



Wood County Constable Ed Shadbolt smiles in victory after he locates the transmitter during PLI training as Reeves, the Wood County Project Lifesaver administrator, marks Shadbolt's locate time.

now over 1,500 documented people in our county alone that have been diagnosed with Alzheimer's and dementia, and the numbers are continuously growing," Reeves says.

Earlier this year, Wood County issued a Silver Alert for a missing elderly woman. She did not have a PLI bracelet. Thankfully, the search ended well, and she was found safe after a four-hour search. "The very next day I was at her house, outfitting her with a bracelet," Reeves says.

That event, along with two others in the same month, has spotlighted the need to get the word out about PLI to more residents.

"I was surprised that not many people know about the program," Wood County Sheriff Jim Brown says. "I have now taken a personal interest in this program and elevated it to a top priority."

Brown gave internal oversight of the program to the patrol lieutenant. He also assigned Criminal Investigations Clerk Janae Holland the additional duty of helping promote the program. The sheriff also asked Reeves to facilitate the training of all patrol deputies in the use of the search equipment.

"If it only saves the life of one individual, it will be totally worthwhile," Brown says.

In addition to recognizing the sheriff's dedication to the program, Reeves also says, "First and foremost, our local Pilot



TOP: The bracelets worn by PLI clients are lightweight and waterproof, and have contact information boldly printed. In past instances, this information has sparked an intervention even before a search was begun. BOTTOM: The hand receiver used by the searchers emits sounds that become stronger as the searcher nears the location of a bracelet.

Clubs should receive some praise because they are the ones that initiated the program here in 2003, being second in the state to have the program, and they are the organizations that fund it for Wood County.”

Caregivers for potential clients who live in Wood County can contact the Mineola, Quitman or Winnsboro Pilot Clubs; stop by the sheriff’s department and pick up a copy of the Pilot Club application; or they can visit mywoodcounty.com to download it from the Project Lifesaver link. Once a client is approved, there is a one-time discounted fee of \$250 for the bracelet. After, there is a \$10 monthly fee that covers the monthly battery change. But Reeves also says that the Pilot Club has scholarships for those who may need assistance with the fees. “Nobody in Wood County that needs this service will go without one because of lack of funds,” she says.

The relationship with the Wood County Sheriff’s Department and the Pilot Club is a model example of how Project Lifesaver International works at the local level. But what if you don’t live in Wood County? In all, there are more than two dozen affiliates in Texas. In east Texas, the Smith, Titus and Upshur counties’ sheriff offices all offer the program through Project Lifesaver International. Van Zandt County is investigating the possibility of adding the service. For anyone else who does not live in an area currently covered, PLI will partner with any police, sheriff, fire, public safety department or emergency response agency that can meet the training and certification requirements.

There is an up-front cost, on average, of about \$5,000 per agency. Interested agencies must submit a letter of intent to PLI. For funding, there are also occasional grant opportunities,

and many agencies are able to kick off a program by appealing to local community civic and service clubs. The cost to implement PLI is a real bargain when a community or agency considers that the average search for a person with Alzheimer’s costs a community \$1,500 per hour. In total, searches average a cost of \$13,500 to complete but can also run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars as days go by.

It’s estimated that 70 percent of those diagnosed with Alzheimer’s or dementia will wander from a caregiver or care setting. Projections are that the current 5.3 million people diagnosed with Alzheimer’s or dementia will grow to a 7.7 million population by 2030. If these numbers bear out, the financial cost of these types of searches will become overwhelming. So, too, the emotional costs will stagger families whose searches for loved ones sadly won’t end with live recovery.

“Some people may be intimidated, [thinking] that the police will be checking on them all of the time,” Reeves says. “But that is not so. Until a caregiver calls to say a loved one is missing, there is absolutely no monitoring. It’s just like a life insurance policy. If something happens, you are very glad it’s there. I only hope that if I’m ever in a condition to need a bracelet, someone will love me enough to put one on me.”

With PLI, recovery times for those lost averaged 30 minutes. To date, PLI has a 100 percent success rate in finding clients who were wearing a transmitter. With PLI in place, it’s possible to hope that vanishings can be erased—and that in the future, all who wander will never be truly lost again.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

Project Lifesaver is a 501(c)(3), community-based, public safety, nonprofit organization that provides law enforcement, fire/rescue, other first responders and caregivers with technology and training to protect, and when necessary, quickly locate individuals with cognitive disorders who are prone to the life-threatening behavior of wandering.

Project Lifesaver International
 815 Battlefield Blvd., South Chesapeake, VA 23322
 Phone: (757) 546-5502 • projectlifesaver.org

At the PLI website, you can search by ZIP code for a local agency and download the application for agency training and certification in uncovered areas. There is also information on a tracking option called PAL, for those not currently in a PLI service area.

LOCAL CONTACTS

Wood County Sheriff’s Office	(903) 763-5461
Upshur County Sheriff’s Office	(903) 843-2541
Smith County Sheriff’s Office	(903) 590-2600
Alzheimer’s Alliance of Smith County	(903) 509-8323
Titus County Sheriff’s Office	(903) 572-6641

WCEC Awards \$25,000 to East Texas Students



The 2014 Power My World Scholarship judges, from left, Pam Joiner, Antonia Henson and Brenda Hunter, had their work cut out for them in their task to select the scholarship winners from among so many qualified applicants.

A PANEL OF THREE INDEPENDENT JUDGES recently awarded \$25,000 in scholarships as part of Wood County Electric Cooperative’s “Power My World” program. Ten local high school students, residing within WCEC’s nine-county service area, will each receive a \$2,000 scholarship toward continuing education. The program is funded entirely by unclaimed capital credit retirements returned to WCEC by the state. Funding does not come from WCEC’s operating budget.

The independent judges were three WCEC members: **Antonia Henson** of Alba; **Brenda Hunter** of Quitman; and **Pam Joiner** of Pickton. These judges used various criteria to select the 10 recipients, who were chosen from among 64 qualified applicants. Each judge was tasked with reviewing the students’ submissions, accompanying academic records, and lists of civic and community achievements. Additionally, each student was required to submit an essay, which was read by each judge. Based on their exceptional work and achievements, the 10 2015 Power My World program high school scholarship recipients are:

Abby Fair of Hawkins; **Cecilia Flores** of Quitman; **Kerry Gonyeau** of Harmony; **Jacob Hays** of Alba-Golden; **Brooke Kellam** of Van; **Hunter Redmond** of Van; **Emilia Sanders** of Quitman; **Ashton Sauseda** of Grand Saline; **Reagan Wigington** of Alba-Golden; and **Danielle Yarbrough** of Winnsboro.

In addition, the winner of a \$5,000 scholarship reserved for a college junior accepted into an accredited engineering school is **Spencer Capps** of Quitman. Capps is a junior at Texas A&M University studying electric engineering.

“Each year, the quality of submissions is refreshing to see,” said WCEC CEO/General Manager Debbie Robinson. “It is a testament to the quality of our East Texas school systems and the achievements we have to look forward to from this crop of students.”



Wood County Electric Cooperative

501 S. Main St. • P.O. Box 1827
Quitman, TX 75783

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Contact Us

CALL US
(903) 763-2203

EMAIL
info@wcec.org

OUTAGE HOTLINE
1-866-415-2951

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wcec.org