

Public Safety-First Responders

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, 70 percent 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.
- A person living with dementia may prefer a warmer environment and be at higher risk in cold weather. In hot weather they may be more likely to get dehydrated, or to wear too many clothes (which may be linked to them generally feeling colder).

Creating a Dementia-Friendly First Responders Community Initiative

Below are a few tips that can help community organizations and first responders work together on dementia-friendly initiatives.

- **Seek Buy-in from Leadership-**

Talk to leaders in local government as a first step. Raising awareness about dementia within the city or county government can greatly enhance success in building community-wide support.

First responder leadership also plays a key role in championing dementia training efforts. Staff are more likely to recognize the importance of this issue if leaders demonstrate a commitment. Fire chiefs, EMS directors, and police chiefs may also have a family member or friend living with dementia, which helps them understand the importance of this issue.

- **Identify Champions within Agencies-**

Having an “insider” who understands priorities and procedures makes it easier to introduce new training programs or policies. Often community organizations conduct dementia training themselves, and having an internal training officer or other staff at the first responder agency who can lead or co-lead training is ideal, as peers tend to engender greater trust. Champions may be those whose position relates to dementia or training, such as law enforcement elder abuse units, training officers, or community liaisons. Similarly, within EMS, it is beneficial to have one or two people dedicated to providing community paramedicine. Identifying team members who are most committed to the premise of community paramedicine helps build the success of the program.

Champions who have personal experience with dementia can be some of the strongest advocates for training and building strong partnerships. Having a family member or friend living with dementia often enables people to better recognize dementia when they see it in their day-to-day work and to initiate contact with a community organization for training.

Creating a Dementia-Friendly First Responders Community Initiative cont'd.

- **Build on Existing Relationships-**

Start with what is already happening in your community: regular meetings of community organizations; task forces that are addressing aging, safety, or similar issues; or existing referral networks. Building on existing activities and relationships is time-efficient. Simply introducing an agenda item to an existing meeting can give members an opportunity to learn from each other about what efforts are already taking place, to increase opportunities for cross-referral, and to build the case for focused projects or partnerships.

Consider state-level organizations. There may be professional associations for first responders that already mandate or provide training to members. Building on this existing structure can greatly expand the reach of your training program and other educational materials.

- **Meet Their Needs-**

Community organizations need to make the case for why this topic is important and how education and tools can help first responders do their work more effectively and efficiently. For example, law enforcement officers tend to understand right away that dementia is an issue, but they may not realize that there is something they can do about it. EMS providers are eager to learn but need more education about dementia. Coming equipped with solutions, statistics, and evidence of positive outcomes can help build the case for involvement.

Dementia-Specific Training and Educational 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.

Law enforcement officers and other first responders should be encouraged to receive dementia-specific training. There are many opportunities for training from local dementia agencies, on-line programs and national associations. 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.

References

1. **Dementia Friends Pennsylvania**
<https://www.dementiafriendspa.org/>
2. **Dementia Friendly America First Responders**
<https://www.dfamerica.org/sector-videos/>
3. **Alzheimer's Society UK: Dementia-friendly Emergency Services Guide**
https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/sites/defaultfiles/2019-11/Dementia%20Friendly%20Emergency%20Services_Guide.pdf
4. **Project LifeSaver**
<https://projectlifesaver.org/>

Additional Resources

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: Certifications For 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/>
- **ACL: Working Together: How Community Organizations and First Responders Can Better Serve People Living with Dementia**
<https://dfmassachusetts.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2019/06/NADRC-How-Community-Organizations-and-First-Responders-Can-Better-Serve-People-with-Dementia.pdf>
- **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>
- **T.A.L.K Tactics for First Responders**
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1nm-mysCEKvIXyoUhJFfwhikRPe75YkRd/view>

Public Safety and First Responders are just one important part of a community. Working alongside other sectors can help the whole community become more dementia friendly. Learn more at dfamerica.org.



Adapted from ACT on Alzheimer's® developed tools and resources.