

Season 1, Episode 6: Project Lifesaver

Speaker 1: You're listening to Real Life Renos with Karen Brown and Melissa Shank. The show where this dynamic duo gets real about your life because change happens to more than just your home.

Karen: Hi, I'm Karen.

Melissa: And I'm Melissa.

Karen: And on today's show, we're going to talk about Project Lifesaver. Project Lifesaver is the premier search and rescue program operated internationally by public safety agencies and is strategically designed for at risk individuals who are prone to the life threatening behavior of wandering. Joining us today to talk about Project Lifesaver is Sergeant Andrew McIsaac of the Ontario Provincial Police who oversees the program Huron County. Welcome, Sergeant McIsaac.

Andrew MacIsaac: Well, thank you for having me.

Karen: Terrific. Let's start with a bit of history about Project Lifesaver in general and then maybe you can tell us how the Huron County OPP came to be involved?

Andrew MacIsaac: Okay. Project Lifesaver is something that was developed by the Chesapeake Bay Sheriff's Office in 1999 in response to ... there was ongoing search and rescue efforts happening where they found that there was a lack of resources and technology to assist them. In other words, they were doing what the say ... they were searching the same way they did 50 years ago and they realized that with the onset of increased technology and different police resources such as helicopters, dogs, et cetera, we could probably or the police could probably increase the chances of successful finds on people who had run away or had gone missing.

Andrew MacIsaac: Now Project Lifesaver has dealt directly with people, not so much in the life or in the ... not so much in the runaway or missing category, but more in the people who are prone to, due to cognitive issues such as autism, dementia, Alzheimer's or Down syndrome, who people who inadvertently would wander away. As a result of this, the Chesapeake Bay Sheriff's Office, in coordination with some of the government officials, came up with a response and Project Lifesaver was introduced.

Karen: So one of the things that I noticed was or have you seen a difference in the age in people? This isn't necessarily an older person's thing, but are you finding even

more middle-aged people are being diagnosed with early onset dementia as well?

- Andrew MacIsaac: Well, I can't speak to the amount of diagnosis happening, but what I can say is that with the increase in autism awareness and certainly in Alzheimer's awareness that people were looking for other resources to help in locating these people should they go missing. Now, in saying that, since I started this program, I have absolutely seen people who in their, some as early as mid 40s to young 50s get diagnosed with early onset dementia or Alzheimer's.
- Andrew MacIsaac: And as a result of that, obviously these people still are quite active and found a need for some sort of resource to know in order to help us with these more active people who aren't necessarily in a home or have more stringent conditions as to where they're going or how they're doing their day-to-day activities. So I have seen some younger people involved, but the younger people tend to be autism patients or the early onset of both dementia and Alzheimer's.
- Karen: Terrific. And you touched on the fact that this is not necessarily for people who are living in long-term care and more and more people are in fact choosing to age in place, so why do we want this type of technology rather than something with GPS like a cell phone?
- Andrew MacIsaac: So there is restrictions. I mean, GPS technology if you are out in the open can absolutely be a really good resource for police and we use it in other aspects of trying to locate people. However, there is some limitations on GPS technology in that if you are in a large building or in the basement of a house and some of these older homes even with the stone foundations, wherever it may be, the GPS simply can't penetrate, and you could be standing outside of a building that someone was in and GPS wouldn't find them.
- Andrew MacIsaac: What was found was that radio location using radio frequencies and radio waves, it was able to penetrate much better and in fact it really isn't a concern. The only real limitation we have for radio frequency is we don't have as broad a spectrum where we have no idea where the person left. If it was a GPS, we could simply, through satellites, track where they would be. With radio frequencies there is, I believe, it's a two kilometer, they have to be somewhere within two kilometers of where we are looking. So the downfall is sometimes it's a bit of a needle in the haystack in the beginning, which we do have, certainly, we have a protocol in place if that's the case.
- Andrew MacIsaac: The upside of it is that if that person who is within two kilometers, the chances of finding them are very, very good. In fact, I have some some stats from Project Lifesaver directly and it's actually quite impressive in that there is so far, since 1998, Project Lifesaver, which is available in Canada, US and Australia and I know it's being looked at in other countries, have had 2,239 searches and the amount of time that is taken to locate using this, what some may call antiquated

technology, is 30 minutes. They also have a very proud number of a 100% success rate and no reported deaths since 1998 when Project Lifesaver has been engaged.

Karen: Wow, so the 2000 has been since 1998?

Andrew MacIsaac: Yes, 2,239.

Karen: Wow. Wow, those are amazing. Those are fabulous numbers. Before we get into exactly how the program works for our listeners, can you talk a little bit about the components of it? What's involved in the actual hardware?

Andrew MacIsaac: So the hardware is there needs to be one base unit and it is quite expensive, and we can get into some ways that that's been offset. Whereas, there is a unit that's needed to kind of the home base for all the tracking mechanisms. So when a client signs up to receive what looks like a wristwatch, and they wear it around their wrist and it is a beacon, so it is constantly sending out a signal. It's whether or not anything is going to receive that signal. So we have two antennas that are handheld and we have two antennas that go in a cruiser. So what these antennas do is that if that person is within two kilometers of where we are looking, and most times it's a house, so if someone is aging at home with their family and they decide they want to go for a walk and they don't return, we have a starting point.

Andrew MacIsaac: And what it is is that there will be, again, unbeknownst to the wearer, this device on your wrist is constantly sending out what we call a ping. And it's constantly saying, "Here I am, here I am, here I am." But unless we have, I mean, it's inaudible, you don't hear it, it's no different than the radio station sending signals into your home for your home radio. But the difference is that each tracking device has a specific frequency and for ease, I will say, if I had a device and the frequency was 123, that frequency is constantly being sent out day and night, 24/7 as long as the batteries are still good in the unit. When I take the antenna that we have, again, we have two mobile and two handheld antennas, and I dial in that I am looking for frequency 123, immediately it'll start picking up if it's within the range, that frequency coming off of the wristband.

Andrew MacIsaac: Now that being said, 123 and 124 are completely different frequencies, so there is no intertwining 123 frequency and 124. It could be as different as 123 and 999, there is no correspondence. They're very, very specific signals that we're looking for. So in our cruisers, if we are more of in a needle in a haystack type of scenario where on foot just isn't going to be, it's not going to get us quick enough, like I said, we want to find these people as quickly as possible, especially in the winter months or in colder weather where they may not be dressed for the weather, time is absolutely of the essence. We have antennas that go on our cruiser, so we could drive at highway speeds all around where we hope the person may be and that antenna will pick up on the cruiser.

- Andrew MacIsaac: Once we pick up that frequency on the cruiser antenna, we get out of our car and we go by hand. And it's a very simple process where if we are pointing the antenna to the north and the person is in the south, so if we're pointing up in the, sorry. If we're pointing the antenna to the north of us and that person is in the south of us in a bush, the ping heard, which is just a simple beep, is very, very, very faint. The minute we turn it around south, there is an absolute distinguishable ping that it's much higher, so we're known to go in that general direction. And as we get closer, the ping heard on that handheld unit gets much louder. So if we deviate to 10 degrees to the right, it'll get lower, so we know that we have to go 10 degrees to the left to keep going in the direction that that ping is coming in the strongest.
- Karen: Amazing. Okay, so that's from your perspective. Let's dive in a little bit to the family perspective in terms of how the program works. Let's assume that I have a member of my family who is on the program. They're wearing the bracelet and all of a sudden I can't find them. What do I do?
- Andrew MacIsaac: Okay. So and that has happened several times and we have not had a confirmed Project Lifesaver activation yet. In other words, we've gotten many calls, actually, saying that a Project Lifesaver participant has gone missing, the police are called. So we immediately, the first thing we want, like in any missing persons case, especially with Project Lifesaver, people may have heard this, you have to be missing for 24 hours to be missing. That is unequivocally incorrect. The issue is we want to know as fast as possible when someone goes missing, especially someone who is vulnerable or someone who has a cognitive disability, we want to know as quickly as possible. So they would call us and our comment to them would be, "Have you contacted the family? Have you contacted friends and have you gone to the places that are likely to go?" There's many ... they're very ... the people involved in Project Lifesaver, some of them are very, very ritualistic.
- Andrew MacIsaac: In other words, they want to go to Tim Horton's at a certain time of the day or they want to do their laundry at a certain time of the day, just trying to keep some sort of independence. Now the issue becomes when families don't communicate, nine times out of 10, that family, when that person goes missing, another brother's, sister's son, whatever it may be, grandson has gone and picked that person up to take them out to lunch or whatever it may be or to run some errands and it's just a communication issue. And on the other side of things, if that person is for no reason gone, we've checked everywhere, we will engage Project Lifesaver right there and then it start right away. However, the vast, vast majority of time, this is simply a communication issue between families and everyone gets concerned when they come home and and mom or dad or grandma or grandpa aren't home and no one seems to know where they are, their first call because of panic and which is completely understandable, the call is to 911 saying, "My loved one has gone missing."

- Karen: You bring up such a great point because I think most of our listeners, including myself, would be thinking and exactly what you said, you would not contact the police until after 24 hours, which you have said is not the case, which I think everybody needs to know that information first and foremost.
- Andrew MacIsaac: Yeah. So in the policing business, there's something that's called a habitual runaway. Okay? So that's people that they're not necessarily missing, they're choosing not to be found. Okay? So they're voluntarily leaving. And in a case like that, I mean, we will have a tracking record of this person's gone missing and sometimes it's at risk youth or maybe someone who's a substance dependent, where we would go, "Okay, this isn't ... there's nothing untoward. This person isn't on any medications that they absolutely have to have." And we dial it back a bit. That's not to say we still don't put a 100% effort into it, but we know that the inherent risk may not be there.
- Andrew MacIsaac: But in a Project Lifesaver scenario, I would suggest that if someone was to go home and then their loved one is not there, that some phone calls to family and friends would be your first line of business and then it would be to the police. Now, if you are one of these people who go, "This is completely out of character and I would've got called if my brother was picking dad up," or whatever it may be, then absolutely, we would like to call right away and you know what? If we get canceled halfway through, which happens more than nine times out of 10, we're just as happy as you are. Everyone is safe, everyone is accounted for.
- Andrew MacIsaac: I almost wonder, with project lifesaver, do you ever get people wanting to know if their kids can be ... I get the whole idea that this is for people with dementia and Down syndrome, but it almost seems like parents would want this for their children at some point as well.
- Andrew MacIsaac: So we ran into a bit of a risky scenario there where we don't want to parent your children, number one, that's the parent's responsibility.
- Karen: Naturally, yeah.
- Andrew MacIsaac: The issue becomes, as it does with many things, is there an invasion of privacy here? I mean, someone, I mean, if it's a young, young child and someone really wants to track their child, there's hardware in place or you could do that on your own from your own home computer, whether it be what's called a tile or whatever, a GPS locator they put in their backpack. And I've seen that, they'll just attach, they'll go attach a GPS locator to their child's backpack or something and they can monitor that from home. For us to say that we're going to be able to monitor the children in Huron County who go missing and have the police called every time some kid doesn't arrive home from school on time is a bit of a stretch for our resources.

- Andrew MacIsaac: That's not to say, again though, that when it is absolutely out of character and some child doesn't come home, we absolutely encourage a phone call to the police and we get them on a regular basis and everything is dropped, and all our resources are turned towards that. So you have to imagine that all of a sudden if we had multiple, multiple people with a transmitter on someone who is of sound mind, we would be awfully busy, awfully quick, but-
- Karen: Well, and you're busy enough as it is right now.
- Andrew MacIsaac: We're very, very busy and especially in Huron County where ... and it's unbeknownst to a lot of people, it's a very, very busy detachment.
- Karen: And so with Project Lifesaver, just to clarify for our listeners, how do you become involved? How do you get to be a part of Project Lifesaver?
- Andrew MacIsaac: If you or someone looking to be a participant?
- Karen: Yes.
- Andrew MacIsaac: Okay. So what you would do is, the Huron County Health Unit is kind of spearheading this, this whole organization, and there's some lady there by the name of Joanne Hickey who's a wonderful lady and is very dedicated to this program. And the biggest restriction for most people is the financial burden. And it was significant at one point in time, and I know that it's a sliding scale and is significant, but they have made it so that, and I actually just had some correspondence from Joanne just the other day, and that initially it was a four or 500 maybe even north of that dollar initiation. This is what you need to get started and then you have to pay for the actual wristband, which I believe the monitoring was \$30 a month or something.
- Andrew MacIsaac: So it may not be something for everyone. However, Joanne is able to secure some funding in that now and we don't know how long this will last, but for now it is simply right off the hop, a \$10 a month monitoring fee and that's it. So if the time is right to get involved, absolutely. And the financial burden is really not very serious at \$10 a month, and I would encourage people to contact the health unit to see if they may qualify.
- Karen: So in other jurisdictions they could look up on the Project Lifesaver website and there would be somebody like Joanne in their jurisdiction who would take care of that for them.
- Andrew MacIsaac: Yes. Well, what I would do is I would call their local health unit and they would be able to direct you in the right ... and put you in the right direction.

- Karen: Okay. Terrific. It seems that not a week goes by that there isn't a news item that we see in the paper or hear on the radio about an older adult wandering off, and in fact I have a friend whose father went missing a couple of years ago. He was gone for several days and he was found in a fast food restaurant a couple of hours away. Would this type of program be suited to someone who has that level of capability? They're right on the cusp sometimes.
- Andrew MacIsaac: Well, and that's sort of the, then again, this is where we were in no way trying to tell you how to run your family by any means, but there needs to be an open dialogue with the individual's doctor and the individual himself as to is this right for you? I mean, someone who can drive, typically wouldn't be a part of Project Lifesaver because it kind of negates the whole process in that if you have the ability to go a long distance in a short time, Project Lifesaver may be not for you, that's where you may want to get into your GPS components, in that the car was last seen.
- Andrew MacIsaac: If they leave from Huron County and all of a sudden they ping the GPS and it shows up at Niagara Falls, us out there with a two kilometer radius antenna isn't going to do much good out in the middle of a farming country in Huron County where ... So people who are typically still have enough cognition to be able to live independently, make decisions on their own, be able to drive, is not someone that we typically say are candidates for Project Lifesaver at this point in time.
- Karen: Terrific. Any final words about Project Lifesaver for us?
- Andrew MacIsaac: Well, I could say the Project Lifesaver, I've seen ... I've been here 21 years. I've seen many incidents of people going missing and the one that points out ... that jumps out most is that there was an elderly man and woman living together and the man had full dementia. And but the wife, being a loving wife that she is wanted to look after him herself, as many people and families do. On this case, as people age, it becomes harder to monitor them correctly. What I think Project Lifesaver does is maybe gives you a little extra time with your loved ones in the home where they want to be. Now, in this case, and this gentleman lived out in a farming area and he simply ... he liked to walk around his property. One day he didn't come home.
- Andrew MacIsaac: He did not have Project Lifesaver technology and he, two days later after we had helicopters, our full emergency response team, canine units and mobile command center, we found him less than a kilometer away in the middle of a six foot tall corn field. And that was simply from old school, our dog and our emergency response members simply, for lack of better term, hunting the corn and hunting the fields until they found him. And they found them in a bad state, he was dehydrated, he was wet, he was cold, he was confused. Now, fortunately he was okay, but that's a perfect example of we could have found

him, and instead of having three days in the bush by himself, we could have found him almost immediately, he was so close.

Karen: Good. Well that's such a frightening scenario for most people to think of and we are of course abundantly grateful for all of the efforts that our police departments make in this regard. Our families are so very important to us. Thank you for taking the time to be with us today, Sergeant McIsaac.

Karen: You can find more information about Project Lifesaver at projectlifesaver.org. We'll post that information in the show notes for you. Thank you for joining us today. We look forward to seeing you for our next podcast episode of Real Life Renos.

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