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## LESSON LEARNED

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### **Special Needs Registries: Coordinating with Law Enforcement Organizations to Strengthen Support for Individuals with Disabilities and Functional Needs**

#### **SUMMARY**

Jurisdictions can use their special needs registries to strengthen law enforcement personnel's support for and response to individuals with disabilities or other functional needs during emergencies.

#### **DESCRIPTION**

In January 2004, law enforcement personnel arrested two 14-year-old students with autism at their high school in Santa Clarita, California, on separate occasions within the same week. On both occasions, the law enforcement personnel were unaware of the students' disabilities and communication issues. Teachers at the high school released the students to law enforcement personnel without being able to explain their exceptional needs. The parents of the students and the school principal were not aware of this situation. In response to these events, the Santa Clarita Valley community began discussing ways that law enforcement's response to and interaction with people with disabilities and other functional needs could be improved through communication and sharing information.

Santa Clarita is located in Southern California and has a population of more than 177,000 people, making it the fourth largest city in Los Angeles and the 26<sup>th</sup> largest city in California. The city sits within the larger Santa Clarita Valley.

Santa Clarita established a voluntary paper registry of individuals with disabilities and other functional needs in October 2004. The primary purpose of the registry was to provide key information about individuals with disabilities to the Santa Clarita Valley Sheriff's Station in advance of an emergency or encounter with law enforcement. Individuals submitted their background information, physical descriptions, and photographs for inclusion in the registry, which was securely maintained by the Sheriff's Station. Individuals also submitted information about locations that the individual was likely to wander to in the event that he or she would go missing.

The registry also assisted law enforcement in search and rescue operations. Prior to the establishment of the registry, law enforcement personnel had to gather information and wait to receive a missing person's photograph before circulating information about the person to law enforcement vehicles on duty. Once the registry was instituted, if a person from the registry was missing, law enforcement personnel immediately had the person's information and photograph available to circulate. The registry also served to help identify "found" individuals with disabilities and other functional needs who could not identify themselves.

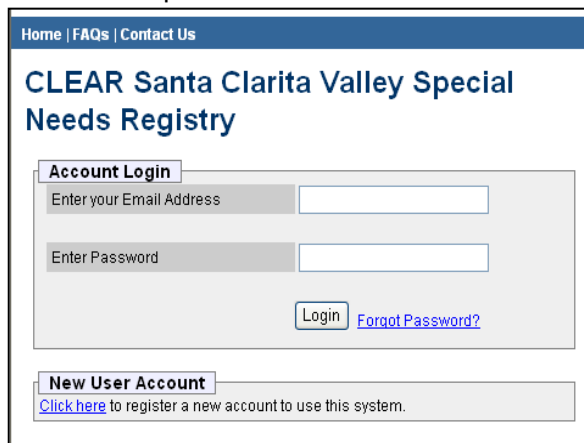
In 2009, Santa Clarita linked the registry with Project Lifesaver, a program designed to assist Santa Clarita Valley sheriff deputies in locating individuals with medical needs, such as autism or Alzheimer's disease, who have a tendency to wander. Individuals in the Project Lifesaver program wear a bracelet that is tracked by radio frequency-based equipment at the Sheriff's Station. All those who used Project Lifesaver equipment were automatically enrolled in the Special Needs Registry, and on several occasions when a person went missing law enforcement personnel had all the necessary information to begin search and rescue operations immediately.

In late 2009, Santa Clarita converted the paper registry into an online registry to better serve the community. The online registry allows individuals to register from home; law enforcement personnel can view updates to the registry in real-time. Individuals who participate in the registry are mailed two Special Needs Registry Identification Cards that contain information from the registration form and can be presented to law enforcement personnel or responders in the event of an emergency. Law enforcement personnel can conduct directed searches on the registry for missing people by descriptors such as gender or age. Law enforcement can also use the registry to create a flier for a missing person that contains the person's photograph and who to contact with information.

The online registry has greatly improved the effectiveness of search and rescue operations for persons with disabilities and functional needs in Santa Clarita by eliminating the need for gathering information prior to commencing rescue operations. On one occasion, law enforcement personnel located a young boy who had eluded his caretakers by using the registry to gather the boy's photograph, his physical description, and the location where the boy was likely to have travelled. In addition, the registry has been particularly useful for search and rescue operations involving individuals who go missing repeatedly. When law enforcement personnel conduct a search for a person with a disability or functional need who is not registered, that individual is encouraged to participate in the registry and in Project Lifesaver upon rescue.

In January 2011, Santa Clarita began phasing out Project Lifesaver radiofrequency trackers by replacing them with Emfinders devices, which are cellular trackers. The new trackers allow law enforcement personnel to track individuals throughout the country instead of only within Santa Clarita. In addition, Santa Clarita plans to create an informative video to circulate on television and online that raises public awareness about the registry and the Emfinders technology.

Jurisdictions can use their special needs registries to strengthen law enforcement personnel's support for and response to individuals with disabilities or other functional needs during emergencies.



The screenshot shows the website interface for the CLEAR Santa Clarita Valley Special Needs Registry. At the top, there are navigation links for Home, FAQs, and Contact Us. The main heading is "CLEAR Santa Clarita Valley Special Needs Registry". Below this, there is an "Account Login" section with two input fields: "Enter your Email Address" and "Enter Password". A "Login" button and a "Forgot Password?" link are positioned below the password field. Underneath the login section is a "New User Account" section with a "Click here" link and the text "to register a new account to use this system."

**Registration Web site for Santa Clarita Valley Special Needs Registry**

**CITATION**

Iland, Emily. Project Manager, Board of Directors of the Santa Clarita Autism Asperger Network. Interview with *Lessons Learned Information Sharing*, 13 Oct 2010.

"Special Needs Registry/Project Lifesaver." City of Santa Clarita, California.

<http://www.santa-clarita.com/index.aspx?page=755>

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