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David S. Aston shows ankle transmitter that is worn by his 10-year-old son, Sawyer.  
Harry Scull Jr./Buffalo News

05/01/09 07:00 AM

## People with special needs are focus as sheriff adopts Project Lifesaver

By Janice L. Habuda  
NEWS STAFF REPORTER

The same technology used to recover stolen vehicles has been adopted by the Erie County Sheriff's Office for potentially lifesaving applications.

During a news conference Thursday in Chestnut Ridge Park, Sheriff Timothy B. Howard announced that the Sheriff's Office is the 13th public safety agency statewide to join Project Lifesaver.

The program registers people with special needs — such as autistic children and adults suffering from Alzheimer's disease or dementia — and outfits them with radio transmitters that make them easier to find should they wander away from caregivers. Several deputies already have been trained on tracking equipment.

“Any parent would understand the terror of finding your child missing,” said Kathy Bunce of Summit Educational Resources of Amherst, which is helping pay the expenses for Erie County to join the network. “You will never forget that moment.

“The difference with a child with special needs is they are not going to come when you call them,” continued Bunce, who has a special-needs child.

Founded in 1999 in Virginia, Project Lifesaver is used by more than 900 agencies across the United States, Canada and Australia. In more than 1,900 searches nationwide, the organization boasts a perfect record and an average search time of less than 30 minutes.

Of the member agencies in New York, the earliest joined in 2005, and 12 successful searches have been reported, according to Amber Whittaker, a spokeswoman for Project Lifesaver International.

“As a parent of a special-needs child, your biggest concern is the wandering of your child,” said David S. Aston, founder of Project Lifesaver WNY. His 10-year-old son, Sawyer, who is autistic and nonverbal, played hide-and-seek with deputies in Chestnut Ridge Park to show how it works.

A transmitter roughly half the size of a small egg, sliced lengthwise, is on a band affixed around a person’s wrist or ankle. Transmitters are waterproof and shockproof, and each has its own radio frequency.

Sheriff’s Deputy Joel K. Schenfield worked on the ground during Thursday’s simulation, using a hand-held antenna and following a course dictated by the beeps from the tracking device. “You work your way toward the noise,” he said. “As we get closer and closer, the tone gets stronger.”

Despite the technology, Schenfield posed a caveat for a successful search. “You have to call us right away,” he said.

LoJack Corp., better known for its wireless tracking and recovery systems for vehicles, owns this technology, as well.

The Sheriff’s Office has two mobile tracking devices; the one in its helicopter has a range of five miles, and the other, used on the ground, has a one-mile range. “The very special thing about this, it’s a one-to-one signal and the speed of recovery would be much greater,” Howard said.

Once someone is registered, caregivers could call 911 to report a disappearance and then ask local police to notify the Sheriff’s Office. Deputies need only the missing person’s name.

The start-up cost to register with Project Lifesaver is \$300 for the transmitter, then \$10 a month for the battery. Each battery lasts 30 to 45 days and transmits signals continuously.

Call 374-0090 for further information or visit [www.projectlifesaverwny.org](http://www.projectlifesaverwny.org) .

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