

Searching for the Mentally Disabled

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I've worked in search and rescue for 25 years and been involved as a planner and searcher using a K-9 to search for many different lost people. A great number were either very young, elderly with Alzheimer's or other forms of dementia, or lost and disoriented due to other mental problems like mental illness, diabetes, drug intake, severe depression, mental retardation, etc. Recent events in my life and a recent search have revealed to me ideas that are crucial to planning these searches.

In the last month of his life, my family put my father in a nursing home. He had Alzheimer's and had gotten to the point where he could not dress or feed himself without help. Help in this case often meant verbally reminding him what to do (like "use your spoon") as well as physically doing tasks for him. By the time he reached this state, he could not understand why he was moving and why he was not in his familiar surroundings. Within a few hours of the move, he was doing his best to get out of the nursing home. He had no ability to find any other location – he only thought that he did not belong where he was and that he should leave. Fortunately, this was a secure facility and he was unable to escape. If he had escaped, he would have had no ability to take care of himself, navigate or understand where he was in relation to anywhere else.

Recently we had a search for a man with an inoperable brain tumor who left a boarding home. He was moved to the home that day from a hospital stay brought on by his being picked up, disoriented, by police in a city two hours travel from the boarding home. He had never been at the home before, and, unfortunately, this was not a secure facility. After supper, he announced to everyone that he was leaving and going to a town where he used to live several years before. The time was dusk, the temperature was 10 degrees, wind fierce, snow two feet deep and temperatures dropped to subzero late that night and for the next week. Although the home reported him missing within an hour to the local police department, Warden Service (the agency responsible for inland search and rescue) was never notified. A warden who is on our search management team read an article in the paper about the missing man almost two weeks later and suggested that Warden Service should be looking into the problem. It seemed likely that the man was deceased not far from the boarding home.

Thus, two weeks after the man was reported missing, the local wardens began an investigation. This work revealed that the local police had driven around the roads in the area of the nursing home and notified the local sheriff's department the day after the man was reported missing, but no other ground search besides talking to the residents in the area had been undertaken. The day's delay for notifying the sheriff's department was caused by the fact that the police department would not put out a teletype until a relative (the boarding home was not sufficient) reported him missing. There were two excellent tracking K-9 teams who lived right in town, but they were never called. Even without a K-9, someone trained to track could have located his tracks in the snow and followed them.

When we planned this search, we tried to figure out what the man's intentions were and where he would be likely to go. In the past, he had ended up driving to Florida with a neighbor, and then, once there, did not understand why he was there and called a friend for transportation back. He was described as a smooth talker but very disoriented. At the time, it seemed like he could have gotten a ride out of the area. I now realize that, if he were like my father, he would only take a ride if it were offered to him. People who are disoriented will take suggestions from others but rarely are able to formulate a plan or action on their own.

Now that I think back on this search, I realize that trying to figure out the intentions of a very young or mentally disabled person is probably erroneous. Based on my experience with my father, I now realize that these people get lost because they have no goal or intention beyond leaving the place they are at the time. Many of them are moving to burn off nervous energy or performing a repetitive behavior (like walking in circles). They don't have the ability to plan a trip or to decide where to go next. They just go, like a car without a driver. Terrain and other obstacles may change their course, but eventually they will crash or get hung up, and there they will stay.

People in the beginning stages of Alzheimer's will often become lost while walking or driving a route they routinely take. Most of the time they are able to negotiate the route because they have traveled it often in the past and remember where to go at each turn. However, if they deviate (like an elderly woman who went off a woods path to walk around a puddle and ended up in the woods a mile away), or forget one turn, they become lost and have no way to recover their path or plan a way out. They also will not have the reasoning ability to understand that going towards the noise of cars on a highway or a barking dog will lead them to safety.

The Alzheimer's literature on SAR research characterizes them as "going until they get stuck." This is a good description. There is no

goal or place they have in mind. They aren't capable of putting their thoughts together to have a goal. This is hard for search planners to understand because they are relatively normal people with plans, goals and busy lives. Planners need to forget goals and look at the facts the investigation has revealed about where the person might be based on sightings, footprints and other clues. Often these searches take place in populated areas where local residents would report seeing someone.

In the case of the search for the missing man, no local residents reported seeing the man after he left the yard of the nursing home. The weather and time were such that local residents were unlikely to be outside unless they were in a vehicle. Police driving the roads did not see him. He was very distinctive physically, so distinguishing him from other men in the area was easy.

An overview of the area revealed a small neighborhood with numerous public buildings, small business and residences. Two blocks from the home railroad tracks marked the edge of town. Beyond the railroad tracks was a large field with clumps of woods. The field/woods area was bordered on one side by a relatively busy state highway. On the other side this area dropped into a tidal marsh that was solidly frozen.

Since the man was not seen in town or on the busy state highway, he most likely was in an area where people do not frequent. The local police had visited houses in the area and, in the last two weeks, word had gotten around town about the missing man. People checked their houses and outbuildings. A few small patches of brush, woods and ravines existed in the neighborhood, so these were logical places to look since cold weather and deep snow had probably kept people and kids out of these areas. The large field/woods area and areas off the railroad tracks that were used as walking paths and snowmobile trails were also logical choices.

We started a search with eight K-9 teams trained in cadaver or SAR work from Warden Service and the local sheriff's department and one fixed wing aircraft from Warden Service. Within an hour and a half of starting, the aircraft spotted the body of the man in a clump of woods beyond the railroad tracks less than a half mile from the boarding home. In spite of rain and two weeks time freezing and thawing, the man's tracks in the deep snow could still be distinguished. He left the packed trail by the railroad tracks and struck across the field and woods from the boarding home in a relatively straight line, going a surprising distance in deep snow and through at least one blow down before he finally expired. He was wearing only blue jeans, sneakers, a medium weight winter jacket and no gloves or hat.

Shortly before the plane spotted the man, one of the experienced K-9s was alerting on the edge of the tracks in an area downwind of the body. The handler, since the field was assigned to another K-9 team, decided to wait until he finished his search area before he went back to let the dog follow the scent. Even if the aircraft had not spotted the man through small break in the softwood trees, the K-9 team would have located him.

After the search, I wondered why the man would leave the lights of town for the deep snow of the field. Now I realize that he was just a car without a driver, headed in a particular direction with no ability to plan for the next minute, much less the next few hours, as evidenced by his leaving without proper clothing for the weather. For some reason this type of person just keeps going in a direction until the terrain stops them. I have seen similar actions by small children who have no ability to navigate because their mental abilities have not developed because of their age. The last three year old we looked for went a mile and a quarter on deep but crusted snow in two hours time, mostly in a straight line on an old woods road. The conditions of deep, crusted snow that holds up small children and dogs but not adults seem to produce a few of these searches in our state each year. The children go fast and adults without snowshoes cannot pursue or search for them. Every tracking dog team that works under these conditions needs to have snowshoes or the handler will not be able to follow the dog.

One advantage a tracking dog has over a normal person is that they don't make any assumptions about goals or destinations. They just follow the scent of the lost person. If the handler does his job and reads and follows the dog without making his own assumptions, the team will be successful.

Air scent search and rescue dogs also search with no assumptions of where the person is. Places that reasoning adults would reject are still searched by the dog. We had one search for a lost 5 year old where a Warden Service K-9 repeatedly indicated on a covered snowmobile in the family's yard. The handler looked all around the snowmobile and even put his hand on the cover without finding anything. The small boy was actually curled up under the cover, sleeping. Like the mentally disabled, small children can be anywhere.

In summary, the lesson on searches for the very young and the mentally disabled is that they have no goal, no destination or ability to navigate or plan where they are going. They might follow suggestions or take directions from someone or something else (lots of little kids follow their dogs into the woods), but they will not "direct" their own

actions. The rule is simply, "they go" (without purpose) "until they get stuck."