

First Responders



First responders play a vital role in supporting people living with dementia

within the community. First responders who are aware,

trained, and educated on dementia and dementia friendly practices

are able to identify a person living with dementia, effectively

communicate with them, locate or offer appropriate services and

supports, and foster a sense of safety for the person living with

dementia and their care partners. First responders ranging from

police officers, firefighters, emergency medical technicians, and

paramedics can all help create a dementia friendly community.

Ready to implement dementia friendly practices?

Follow the steps:

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Prepare

* Recognize common signs and behaviors of dementia.
* Identify champions at the leadership level to sustain the initiative, and acquire or create on-the-ground, “go-to” resources for the department.
* Develop dementia friendly procedures for all staff to follow when encountering a person living with dementia.

Learn

* Learn to use dementia friendly communication skills.
* Know about local services and supports to offer or suggest to people living with dementia available.
* Provide ongoing dementia education and training for all staff.

Respond

* Partner with the local Adult Protective Services agency and other municipal organizations to create a voluntary registry for people living with dementia within your community.

What is Dementia?

Dementia is a general term for a loss of memory and other thinking abilities that is serious enough to interfere with activities of daily life. Dementia has many causes. Alzheimer’s disease, the most common cause of dementia, is a disease of the brain that leads to problems with memory, thinking, and behavior. Alzheimer’s and other dementias are not a normal part of aging.

Signs of Dementia3

* 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 or personality.

Dementia Friendly Communication Skills4,5

* + Speak at a slower pace and allow time for the person living with dementia to process and respond.
  + Use shorter simple sentences and ask one question at a time.
  + Speak clearly and calmly; be patient and understanding; listen.
  + Avoid arguing with or embarrassing the person and limit adding any reality checks.
  + Treat the person with dignity and respect.
  + Be aware of your body language: smile and make eye contact at eye level.
  + Seek to understand a person’s reality or feelings.
  + Apologize and redirect to another environment or subject as needed.

Benefits of Dementia Training and Education6

* + Enhance any interactions with a person living with dementia and guide procedures during that interaction to foster a safe environment.
  + Reduce risk and safety concerns.
  + Prevent or reduce future incidents.
  + Identify people living with dementia within your community and develop best practices for interacting with them.
  + Reducing stigma and creating a safe and inclusive environment for people living with dementia and their care partners.

First Responder Interactions1,2,8,9

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There are many situations where first responders are likely to interact with people living with dementia. The following are a few common dementia-related incidents and situations first responders are likely to be involved in and dementia friendly tips for each.

1. **Wandering and Missing Person’s Report**

Due to common dementia symptoms like forgetfulness and confusion, it is likely to see a person living with dementia wandering and that wandering could lead to the person becoming missing. When looking for a person living with dementia who is wandering or lost:

* + Look in places that may be familiar to that person, like a previous job, a favorite grocery store, a well visited park, etc.
  + The individual may appear disoriented, confused, and/or unaware. Look for individuals with these traits and approach them calmly and slowly.
  + Understand that the individual living with dementia may have inconsistent or conflicting account of the events that brought them to their current location. Please be patient and limit reality checks. Meet them where they are.

1. **Victim of a Crime or Perpetrator of a Crime**

It is common due to the forgetful nature of dementia that a person living with dementia may unknowingly leave a store without paying. In a situation like this:

* + Attempt to contact the person living with dementia’s care partner and inform them about the incident. If this has been a repeated occurrence, you may suggest that accompanied shopping trips may be best in the future.
  + In the event a care partner cannot be contacted, please try to resolve any issues with the store associates and explain to them the situation.

Older adults and people living with dementia are more likely to be victims of crimes like fraud or abuse. In these situations:

* Suggest to the person living with dementia and their care partners to block spam calls, turn on online banking notifications and connect these notifications with a care partner’s device, and offer local resources to help.
* Encourage reporting of scams and create a database of these scammers and educate the community about them.

1. **Home Welfare Check/ Abuse or Neglect Reports**

A person living with dementia may be living alone, left unsupervised, at risk of falls or medical attention, or experiencing abuse or neglect in the home. In this case a first responder may be asked to conduct a welfare check, during these checks, be sure to:

* Follow all dementia friendly communication skills when conversing with the person living with dementia.
* If the individual is not in immediate danger, try your best to refer them to available local resources.
* Involve Adult Protective Services

1. **Traffic Violation**

Driving is a form of transportation, but for some older adults, it is a form of independence. Most older adults will want to continue driving for as long as possible. However, as dementia progresses, it can likely impair driving skills such as level of concentration, judgements, orientation, perception, and some physical abilities.

* Report an at-risk driver.
* Refer patient to MedicAlert®+ Alzheimer’s Association Safe Return®.

1. **Disaster Response**

Responding to a disaster with a person living with dementia may be challenging, but in these situations, it is important to stay calm and hone in on your dementia friendly practices. There are a few key important things to do in a disaster response with a person living with dementia.

* Try to redirect and relocate. Redirect the person living with dementia with a task or a topic of conversation and relocate the individual to a safe and quiet environment.
* Slowly and concisely provide step by step instructions for the individual to follow to help them out of a situation. Remember to be as patient as possible.
* Avoid using any sort of physical force or restraints, this can cause stress and panic to the individual resulting in undesired behaviors.
* Use a 1:1 system and ensure the person living with dementia is always accompanied by someone who is trained in dementia friendly practices. This will help to prevent wandering and provide comfort to the person living with dementia.

Warning Signs3

Signs of inadequate patient support or overburdened care partner:

* + Poor medication adherence.
  + Weight loss.
  + Falls.
  + Wandering and being found by neighbors or police.
* Missing appointments.
* Decreased attention to hygiene and grooming.
* Unhelpful visits to urgent care/emergency room.

References

1. **Quick Tips for First Responders**  
   [Quick Tips for First Responders (alz.org)](https://www.alz.org/media/Documents/alzheimers-dementia-first-responder-quick-tips.pdf)
2. **Dementia Resource Toolkit for First Responders**[First Responder Toolkit\_6.8.22.pdf (lacounty.gov)](http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/seniorhealth/docs/First%20Responder%20Toolkit_6.8.22.pdf)
3. **Alzheimer’s Association, Know the 10 Signs** <http://www.alz.org/alzheimers_disease_10_signs_of_alzheimers.asp>
4. **Alzheimer’s Society, Communicating** <https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/info/20064/symptoms/90/communicating_and_language>
5. **Home Instead Business Training, Alzheimer’s Friendly Business online course**[http://www.helpforalzheimersfamilies.com/alzheimers- care-training/alzheimers-friendly-business-training/](http://www.helpforalzheimersfamilies.com/alzheimers-%20care-training/alzheimers-friendly-business-training/)
6. **Alzheimer’s Disease International, World Alzheimer’s Report 2011** <https://www.alz.co.uk/research/WorldAlzheimerReport2011.pdf>
7. **Lazaroff, A., et al. Using Dementia as the Organizing Principle when Caring for Patients with Dementia and Comorbidities, January 2013, Minnesota Medicine**<https://experts.umn.edu/en/publications/using-dementia-as-the-organizing-principle-when-caring-for-patien>
8. **Alzheimer’s Orange County Training for Safety Services**[Training for Safety Services - Alzheimer's Orange County (alzoc.org)](https://www.alzoc.org/professionals/training/)
9. **Dementia-Friendly Law Enforcement and First Responders**[Dementia-Friendly Law Enforcement and First Responders (wisconsin.gov)](https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/publications/p01269e.pdf)

Additional Resources

For additional resources related to the *First Responder* sector and a host of other community sectors, please visit [DFA's resource page](https://dfamerica.org/resource-listing/).

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Dementia friendly first responders are a critical part of a dementia friendly community. Working alongside other sectors, first responders can help the whole community become more dementia friendly. Learn more about the process and help your community and others become more dementia friendly at [www.](http://www/) dfamerica.org.