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## Wrist devices guard aged

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BY REBECCA GOLDSMITH  
 STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Joseph Rossi bought his sleep back for \$67 a month. Peace of mind came in a miniature monitor strapped to his father's wrist. The gadget is a leash of sorts, but without the collar. Emitting inaudible radio signals, it sets off an alarm whenever his 88-year-old father leaves the home they share in Camden County.

The reassurance is a godsend for Rossi, whose father, also named Joseph, lost his short-term memory and reasoning skills a few years ago after a series of strokes. His illness makes him take off on aimless and sometimes dangerous journeys. Then it's up to his son, who cares for him around the clock, to track him down.

Now, when his father leaves their property, a high-pitched beeping sound goes off immediately on the portable radio receiver in their house. Since getting the system in August, the older Rossi hasn't made it past their block. But if he ever gets further, the radio receiver becomes a kind of homing device that can give Rossi and professional searchers his father's exact location.

"It changed my life a lot," the younger Rossi said. "I'm a whole lot more peaceful, less worrisome."

Nicknamed "LoJack for people," the system is one of a growing menu of high- and low-tech methods for tracking habitual wanderers like Rossi. Though experts do not fully understand the causes of dementia-induced wandering, they know its effects only too well. Sixty percent of people with Alzheimer's disease will wander at some point. If they are not found within 24 hours, their chances of dying are greater than 50 percent.

As the population ages and more people get cognitive impairments, local police, long-term care facilities and households are checking out existing options and experimenting with new ones.



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There is no national registry for wandering cases, but experts estimate there are 125,000 incidents nationwide each year. In the mid-Atlantic states, one in five searches ends in a fatality.

New Jersey's Department of Health and Senior Services counted 46 "elopements" this year from long-term care facilities alone. The numbers seem to be growing, said Penny Sullivan, president of the Bergen County-based Ramapo Rescue Dog Association, one of the largest and oldest search and rescue groups in the area.

Observers count a dozen deaths of elderly wanderers from New Jersey during the past six years. The cases invoke fear of the worst in administrators at long-term care facilities like Renaissance Gardens in Tinton Falls, where resident Alice Black wears a monitor to let her wander freely inside while preventing her from leaving the facility.

Lost Alzheimer's patients pose unusual challenges to searchers because they react differently from, for instance, lost children or hunters. They often hide in briars or bushes, and they don't always respond to their own names. They're often found "where no one in their right mind would go," said Robert Koester, a researcher studying wandering for the Virginia Department of Emergency Management.

Potential solutions range from the celestial to the eclectic. In Barcelona, the Spanish Alzheimer's association is experimenting with satellites and global positioning technology to track wanderers. And in North Carolina's Gaston County, police are collecting and preserving a bank of sweat samples on cotton swabs to give bloodhounds a scent to follow.

The largest effort is the Alzheimer's Association's Safe Return program. For \$40, enrollees get an entry in a national database. If they wander, whoever finds them can call the toll-free number on their identification label to get them back home. Since 1993, the program has registered almost 80,000 people and helped 6,300 get home.

In New Jersey, police departments in the retiree-rich areas of Ocean and Monmouth counties have started to take the initiative to prevent costly and dangerous wandering incidents. The Safe Outreach for Seniors program, run by the geriatric evaluation service at Kimball Medical Center in Lakewood, trains officers to recognize signs of dementia when they respond to car accidents, domestic disputes and other routine calls.

In Berkeley Township, Ocean County, police spent \$15,000 from a block grant to buy a radio receiver and wristband transmitters like the ones Rossi and Black wear. The system, made by Illinois-based Care Trak, promises to cut long and costly searches down to an

average of 20 minutes.

But the new technology has its pitfalls. Family members already struggling to provide 24-hour care often find the fees prohibitive. Staff at long-term care facilities sometimes become so accustomed to the door alarms that they ignore them, or even undermine systems by propping open security doors.

And Berkeley has had trouble giving away more than two of its 20 free bands. Officers set out this month on two searches for lost townspeople, but neither was wearing a band.

"Everybody's just a little leery," Koester said. "Older folks are just a little scared of new things."

Experts say the best precaution is preventing wanderers from leaving home in the first place. Richard Olsen of New Jersey Institute of Technology's Health and Aging Center suggests disguising doors, enclosing part of a yard or porch, or creating safe, open paths indoors.

"The magic bullet doesn't exist yet," Koester said. "There isn't really any one thing that I could recommend to people, 'This is what you must have. This is the solution to the problem.'"

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