DID YOU KNOW?

People with certain conditions, such as Autism or Dementia, may be more likely to wander.

The most common reason people go missing is because they intentionally leave a supervised location.

There were 244 missing person incidents reported in the DDS HCSIS Incident Management system in 2017. These incidents involved 184 people.

Late afternoon (3pm – 6pm) is the most commonly reported time of day for missing person incidents.

An Incident Report should be filed in HCSIS for all missing person events.

Missing Persons

A person receiving services from DDS is considered "missing" when they have disappeared and their location is unknown. When determining whether a person is "missing", staff should consider the person's degree of community independence and their safety skills, as well as what is typical for them. If the person is considered to be in immediate jeopardy because they are without regular monitoring or medical supervision, they should be considered missing immediately upon discovery of the disappearance.

Types of incidents

People who are missing may be exposed to dangerous situations (bodies of water, traffic, etc.) that increase their risk of injury, harm, abuse, or death. The most commonly reported causes of missing person incidents are elopement, wandering, and abduction.

- Elopement: Leaving care unsupervised, unnoticed, prior to scheduled discharge and/or not returning to a supervised location at an agreed-upon time. This can be intentional or unintentional, as in the case of becoming lost.
- Wandering: Moving aimlessly without an appreciation of personal safety, which may result in a person leaving a supervised location or disappearing from regular supervision
- Abduction: Forcibly removed against the person's will.

Contacting Law Enforcement (LE)

When someone is believed to be missing, and at risk, the following steps should occur: contact the police immediately, contact the guardian (if applicable) and consult your agency's protocol on missing persons. A person supported by DDS may be reported to the police as a missing person before 24 hours has elapsed. It may take some advocacy to ensure that LE knows of the risk that the person may be in and thus the need for quick action. Local and state police have social media pages that can be utilized to quickly get the word out that someone is missing. With LE's assistance, local news media outlets can be contacted directly with important information.

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Risk Assessment

The most common reasons people are reported missing are elopement (leaving an unsupervised area intentionally), wandering, and abduction.

Why do people elope? People elope for a variety of reasons, including a strong desire to run *towards* something or run *away* from something. Running *towards* something may include a person they enjoy and want to see, a place they want to visit, or fulfilling a need for exercise, sensory stimulation, or exploring. Running *away* from something may include an upsetting situation such as receiving distressing news, not being able to get or do what the person wants in the moment, or feeling anxious, depressed, frustrated or bored. Escaping uncomfortable sensory stimuli in the environment as well as other underlying, unmet needs such as hunger, inactivity, or pain can also contribute to a desire to elope. If someone becomes lost or separated from the group this is generally referred to as unintentional elopement.

Risk Factors: A person's risk for elopement is strongly tied to individual risk factors and motivation. The following factors increase **a person's risk for eloping:**

- Mental health conditions that impair judgement, reduce impulse control, cause low frustration tolerance, anxiety or depression.
- Dementia, memory loss, or perceptions of distorted reality (delusions, hallucinations).
- Poor decision-making skills, poor coping skills, poor communication skills or a history of being easily reactive; previous history of eloping.

Wandering

People sometimes wander away from home or service settings, resulting in a missing person incident. Dementia or symptoms of dementia, Autism, taking medications that cause confusion and restlessness, memory and recall deficits, poor understanding of objects in relation to space, disorientation, expressive language deficits, agitation/aggression, and poor sleep patterns all increase a person's risk for wandering.

Abduction

People are occasionally reported missing due to abduction. Awareness of high-risk situations, such as meeting strangers online, being drawn to new people or strangers, or being extremely trustworthy/easily lured, may help reduce this risk.

Autism and Law Enforcement Coalition (ALEC)

People with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), more than others, are likely to exhibit elopement or wandering behavior. For example, people with more severe ASD, especially in relation to their ability to respond to social interactions, may be at heightened risk. People with ASD may also be drawn to locations with high risk for their safety, such as bodies of water. People with ASD may have sensitivity to sirens and other loud noises that can make involving law enforcement challenging. ALEC is a program that trains First Responders (Fire, Police and EMS personnel) on ASD. The program emphasizes best practices when involved in a crisis situation with someone who has ASD.

http://www.arcsouthnorfolk.org/alec-first-responder-training.html

Prevention and Management

Staff may be able to predict or anticipate elopements by understanding a person's history, patterns, and risks and then implementing strategies to prevent the elopement, especially during high-risk times or situations.

Individual and Environmental Strategies

Individual:

- Be aware of "triggering" events such as anniversaries of significant dates that cause anxiety or upset (e.g. death of a loved one) and places the person may likely go, such as a cemetery. Some holidays can also be a triggering event for people.
- Be aware of places the person may perseverate on, such as bodies of water.
- Be aware of situations that typically trigger elopement and work with staff to reduce these situations, i.e. boredom, arguments, desire to go into the community, etc.
- Work with the person to develop stress responses or coping skills, which may reduce frustration and anxiety.
- At calmer times, ask people where they would go if they wanted to elope. Who and where would they go to? This information will help develop a response plan that includes likely locations of elopement.

Environment:

- Consider environmental triggers such as visual cues that trigger an impulse to leave like seeing keys or a jacket by a door

Pay attention to signs of impending elopement such as:

- Person stating a desire to go home (or another location), or feeling confined, or restricted.
- Expressed displeasure with a wandering-prevention strategy.
- Behaviors that indicate anxiety or boredom.
- Exit-seeking behaviors, such as hovering near exits or waiting for the opportunity to leave with someone.
- Packing belongs for an extended absence.

General Prevention Strategies

- Regularly reassess elopement risk.
- Attempt to avoid or de-escalate situations that may cause people to want to elope.
- Attempt to reduce anxiety or agitation through redirection or by encouraging people to use coping strategies when they are upset.
- Consider increasing supervision to "eyes on" at times when the person seems likely to elope.
- Whenever possible, people should know their address and phone number, or carry this info on them.
- Encourage anyone traveling independently around the community to have a cell.
- When in the community, plan a meeting spot in case someone gets separated and teach people what to do if they are separated from the group. For example, look for a police officer.
- Ensure there are enough staff to adequate supervise people when in the community.
- Ensure doors and fences are secure. Consider restrictive interventions such as door or window alarms, if needed, and with HRC approval.
- Teach safety skills. For example, teach the person to swim if they typically run towards water.
- Ensure people have updated Emergency Fact Sheets with current color photographs and identification cards that have emergency contact information.

MA DDS Data, Guidelines and Resources

Data from the DDS Home and Community Services Information System (HCSIS) reveals trends in missing person incidents from DDS residences and programs.

- In 2017, there were 244 missing person incidents reported in HCSIS for people served by DDS. These incidents involved 184 people.
- Law Enforcement was contacted 70% of the time.
- Three times as many males were reported missing in 2017 as females.
- People were reported most often from their residence and the community.
- More missing person incidents occur in the afternoon and evening (3pm – 6pm), possibly due to the busy travel and transportation times.
- More missing person incidents are reported in June and July than in other months.

Number of Incidents per person	Number of people
1	159
2	10
3	8
4	1
5	2
6	2
7	1
8	1
Total People	184

Immediate Response Actions When Someone is Missing:

Actions to locate a missing person should not be viewed as a step-by-step process but rather an all-out search with all available resources. Quick action increases the likelihood of finding a missing person.

- Search the immediate area where the person was last seen.
- In case of immediate environmental concerns - contact Law Enforcement.
- Call person's cell phone; enable personal GPS device if applicable.
- Search frequently visited places.
- Consider the person's independence level and follow program/agency/DDS notification protocols.
- Notify the Area Director and guardian if the person is not quickly found.

Important information needed when reporting a person missing:

- The time and place last seen.
- Physical description of the person including the clothes the person was wearing.
- Any unusual identifying characteristics.
- Language spoken; any communication difficulties.
- Note if the person carries a cell phone.
- Any immediate medical needs.
- Note any location where person has gone frequently, has talked about going to, or has been found in the past.
- Contact info for the police to let someone know when the person is located.

Analyses conducted by:
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