

Persons with Mental Illness Who Are Homeless or Missing: A Guide for Families

People with mental illness cannot always communicate their thoughts clearly or understand what others are saying to them. In confusion, some will retreat. Others have grandiose ideas and cannot make sound judgments. Sometimes they leave home or other secure surroundings, and they become homeless or missing. They can be gone for days, weeks, months or years. Often they leave behind distraught families, who are desperate to return their loved ones home or to another safe place.

If you have a missing loved one with serious mental illness, the following steps and information may be helpful:

1. Notify your local police immediately of your missing loved one and provide them with all the information you can. If the person remains missing more than three (3) days, ask the police to place them on the FBI's National Computer (NCIC) list as an "endangered adult". This computer network provides information nationwide. The network will give you a police number to use when searching for your relative.
2. When missing persons with mental illness over age 21 are located, the police and other agencies cannot hold or ask that they be held against their will if they have not committed a crime. No one has the authority to force the person to seek aid or medical care against his or her will unless there is a medical guardianship or court order specifying what action to take when the individual is found.
3. Prepare a one-page flyer which includes a picture of the missing person, along with his or her vital statistics (age, height, weight, hair color, eye color, clothes last seen wearing, last known location, etc.). The following list of groups, agencies, and organizations might be able to help if you contact them:
 - A. **Local NAMI Affiliates** - Call your local affiliate and ask for a NAMI contact person in the state where the person was last seen. Send a description sheet or flyer to the local NAMI affiliate for circulation at their meetings. Contact information for all local NAMI offices can be found at www.nami.org/local or by calling 1-800-950-NAMI (6264).

B. Churches, Synagogues & Other Houses of Worship - Houses of worship are often used as shelters and soup kitchens. Many homeless individuals contact the church they were affiliated with during their childhood. Ministers, priests, rabbis or other clergy may well recognize adults who were once children of their congregation.

C. College Campuses - Colleges and technical schools have lounges and cafeterias. Some of them are considered comfortable hangouts because they offer a place out of the cold or heat, food is available, there is human contact, and anonymity can be found among the crowd. Take a picture of the missing individual to the cafeteria and ask a staff member to help you. There may be a bulletin board where notices can be posted. Students have been known to be mistrustful of parents looking for their kids, so emphasize the nature of your search.

D. Community Health Centers - Community health centers often treat people regardless of income or insurance. If your family member is traveling without insurance or cash and needs medical attention, he or she will usually use the local hospital emergency rooms. If the medical attention is not an emergency, he or she may be referred to a local community health center. Community health centers have all kinds of names: free clinics, Health Care for the Homeless, Blue Bus, Health Network, AIDS Center, etc. They usually have community bulletin boards where you can hang the missing person's picture or your flyer.

E. Creditors - The person may have relocated and may be making payments on a loan or applying for credit. If possible, get a list of previous creditors.

F. Hospitals - Get a list of the public and private psychiatric wards from the local mental health administrator. Emergency room personnel usually remember people who come in from the streets. Be aware that they may not give you any information due to confidentiality laws, but you can notify them that you are a relative of the missing person who is interested in their welfare.

G. Public Library - The local library is a comfortable place for many people who are homeless. Many of the homeless shelters are not open during the day so people often use local libraries to stay warm, use the bathrooms, read, hang out, and blend in with everyday life. The janitors know who uses the building for more than just reading.

H. Mass Transportation Centers - Bus and train stations are somewhat similar to libraries in comfort and convenience for people who are homeless. Unlike libraries, however, bus and train depots are not as easy to hang out in. The bathrooms aren't as clean and loitering is frowned upon. Airports are the least used unless of course the missing individual has access to airfare.

I. Free Meal Sites - Most urban areas have well-organized meal sites. Find one and ask about the others. People use meal sites most often near the end of the month and may travel from site to site. Everyone seems to know the regulars by name and face.

J. Red Cross - Check your local phone directory for contact information, or visit www.redcross.org.

K. Salvation Army - For a small fee the Salvation Army will file a missing person's report in their national computer system. A missing person's report will not be filed for anyone missing less than 3 months. Many Salvation Army locations also have shelters. Call the nearest Salvation Army regional office for further details, or visit www.salvationarmyusa.org:

- Northern, Southern, and Central US : 800-315-7699
- Western US : 800-698-7728

In order for the report to be filed, you will need the person's full name, date of birth, and social security number.

L. Shelters - There are public and private homeless shelters. Call your local Salvation Army, YWCA, YMCA, or Social Service Agency for a list of shelters in the area. Most shelters maintain a list of those persons who have used the shelter and will usually tell you if your relative is currently living there or not.

M. Social Security Office - (Subject to regulatory change) Call your local Social Security Office and ask who in your area is officially contracted as the Third Party Agency. Example: A homeless shelter in Madison, Wisconsin, has a contract with the Social Security Office as a Third Party Query site. The shelter submits computer information on the name, date of birth, and social security number. This information is submitted to the central computer in Green Bay Wisconsin. Information returned includes Social Security and/or SSI information: address of where the last check was sent and when, a payee (if any), the amount of monthly benefit, and more. Visit www.ssa.gov for more information.

N. Social Service Agencies - Someone who is homeless will often be referred to the Social Service Agency for General Assistance (welfare). The local Health and Human Services Office almost always runs these programs. Call an intake worker and ask who you would see if you came to town with no money and no housing. Most public agencies will tell you if your family member has been on assistance. However, your contact person at a homeless shelter may ask the same questions and get more answers.

What to Do When the Missing Person Is Found

A. General Information

Services for persons with mental illness vary widely from area to area. Finding appropriate services for the missing individual at a distance will probably be a frustrating experience. Your approach should be tailored to the missing individual's condition and wishes, as well as to the reality of inadequate services in many areas.

Once a police report has been made in your city and the person has been found in another city, the police in the receiving city may be willing to transport the individual to the hospital for evaluation and treatment. They may also have a social service department themselves or provide linkages to other sources of assistance. Some states have interstate pacts between Mental Health Systems which may provide transportation from one system to another. Call and ask your Mental Health Center or state Mental Health office for more information.

B. Telephone Calls

When accepting a collect call from a missing person you may first want to ask where the call is coming from. This may not be advisable in all cases.

C. Money

While NAMI does not recommend or endorse the following companies, this information may be helpful when trying to get money to a missing relative.

- Western Union – If a person is out of funds and you feel comfortable sending them money, you may do so through a Western Union Office using a prearranged code. Professionals suggest that you send as little money as possible at a time. This encourages on-going communication. Visit www.westernunion.com.
- ComChek – ComChek, a company of Comdata Network Holdings, Inc., allows people to send money to over 6,000 truck stops throughout the United States. ComChek takes only Visa, MasterCard, or cash at designated locations. In order to pick up money, the person receiving it at the truck stop will need to show identification. The toll-free number for Com Check is 1-800-833-9110. They will be able to answer any other questions you may have about their service. You may also visit www.gocomchek.com for locations from which to send money.

D. Travel

Airlines: A pre-paid ticket can be purchased with cash or credit card from your local travel agent, over the internet, by phone, or directly from the airline counter at the airport. There is a non-refundable service charge. On the ticket you may specify who has the right to a refund (if any) if the ticket is not used, or whether it is exchangeable (in accordance with the rules and regulations set by the airline). Ask your travel agent for details.

Train: A pre-paid ticket may be purchased from your travel agent or Amtrak counter. There is a non-refundable service charge. This service is not available at all locations. In order to purchase a pre-paid ticket, both the point of origin and local Amtrak counters must be open. An I.D. is necessary for ticket pick-up. I.D. can be any legal document with the name of the traveler on it. Call your local Amtrak office for more details, or visit www.amtrak.com.

Bus: A pre-paid ticket may be purchased from your local Greyhound station. There is a non-refundable service charge. This service is not available at all locations. In order to purchase a pre-paid ticket, both the point of origin and the local Greyhound station must be open. I.D. is preferred, but the ticket can be picked up with a prearranged code. Other bus companies may have similar arrangements. Visit www.greyhound.com.

Travelers' Aid International (TAI): A TAI office is usually located in a bus or train station. Try to locate the one nearest to you and become familiar with this organization. They can prove to be your best source of help with transportation needs. TAI can sometimes get charity-rate bus tickets (25% off the regular price). Although policy varies from state to state, in many cases it is possible to send a person home at no cost, although this may take a few days. TAI can generally provide for the person's basic needs during this interval.

In addition, TAI can also board your relative on the bus, train or plane (during working hours) and make protective travel arrangements with other TAIs en route.

TAI suggests that when at all possible send very little actual cash. If your relative is currently delusional, he or she may use very poor judgment in spending it or get robbed or "conned" out of the money. If possible, work through a TAI office and deposit money (in your city) or make arrangements with a TAI in the city in which the missing individual finds him/herself. They will disperse the funds to assist in buying food, getting a hotel room or buying a ticket. More information at www.travelersaid.org, including national health and human services organizations.

Prepared with the technical assistance of NAMI Ohio, June 2000; revised June 2007