

## History of the Premise Alert Program

The Premise Alert System for people living with disabilities and health challenges is a unique example of organizations from a variety of disciplines working together for the benefit of the community. This form came about under the direction of Police Chief Kevin C. McCarthy, Sr. It started as his response to a family's need for their son who carries a dual diagnosis of Autism and Mental Retardation. Due to the child's disabilities, he had a tendency to escape from secure settings. Susan F. Rzucidlo, the mother of this young child, approached Chief McCarthy for help on how to better educate and provide greater understanding to the police and other first responders of her son's disability. Chief McCarthy guided Ms. Rzucidlo through the basics of what officers needed to learn about her son's disability, offered to take a digital photo of her son, and created a Premise Alert data summary for him.

Coincidentally, within a few weeks several instances surrounding calls for assistance for people living with special needs were made to his Police Department. Chief McCarthy recognized the need to develop a proactive system that documented essential information that emergency personnel should have when responding to the needs of a diverse population. He recruited and worked with Susan Rzucidlo to create the Premise Alert Program for People Living with Special Needs. Together, they formed an informal committee with Dr. Connie Ames, Director of Special Education in the Kennett Consolidated School District (KCSO), and Kate Rentschler, a Social Worker at KCSO.

The general idea behind the Premise Alert Program for people living with special needs is not new. What is new and unique to this Program, is the idea that Police, Fire, Emergency Medical Services, and 911 Centers, can work together with families, as well as education and human service agencies, to benefit all parties. Chief McCarthy led the effort in contacting and informing the Police, Fire, Emergency Medical Services, and the 911 center for Chester County. He also forwarded the form and program description to each Police Department within the county, informed the county Police Chiefs Association, and helped coordinate with the Emergency Service Department. Chief McCarthy took the time to educate and explain the benefits of using the form to Police officers and other First Responders. This form assists first responders by giving them advanced information, both medical and behavioral, that helps them be better prepared and more knowledgeable before they enter a residence or interact with an Individual with special needs. This advanced knowledge leads to more accurate assessments and appropriate responses in emergency situations. The underlying principle of the Premise Alert Program is that the more First Responders know about a situation or individual before they respond, the more likely they will achieve a positive outcome during the interaction.

Susan Rzucidlo was the Liaison to the Chester County Department of Mental Health/Mental Retardation (MH/MR), where she worked closely with county officials to adopt the Premise Alert Program. Subsequently, Gary Entekin, the Chester County MH/MR Administrator, required every caseworker to include this form as part of their annual reviews for Individuals with Special Needs. Mr. Entekin also notified the County Behavioral Health Rehabilitation Services (BHRS) Office, Early Intervention Agencies, County Department of Aging, Children, Youth & Families (CYF), and Juvenile and Probation Office (JPO) systems about the Premise Alert Program and suggested that they utilize this form, as well. Educational outreach was facilitated with the assistance of the Chester County Intermediate Unit (CCIU). The Intermediate Unit solicited the help of every Special Education Director in the county. The Directors were asked to include this form in the Individual Education Program (IEP) process. The Premise Alert Program Form has been used in private homes, group homes, and institutional settings in Chester County. These entities are all committed to supporting and assisting families with special needs. And it should also be noted that many of them have expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to provide a new resource and tool for the added safety of the people and communities they serve.

Families were notified through support groups, both online and in person, as well as by receiving mailings, from their local human service agencies and providers that serve their loved ones. Individuals and their families have embraced this program; they see it as a new safety net and an opportunity to educate first responders to their special needs in an easy, non-threatening way. The disability community views the Premise Alert Program as a useful tool to assist families struggling with elopement issues, rare medical disorders, and other special needs.

In 2004, the Chester County Commissioners recognized Kevin McCarthy for his work in directing this project. Now, with the support of Speaker Dennis M. O'Brien of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives and Secretary Estelle B. Richman of Pennsylvania's Department of Public Welfare and the continued tireless dedication of Uma Ramaswamy at DPW, it is our hope that the Premise Alert Program will soon be in place as a statewide initiative.

This team has been honored to work with the Philadelphia Police Department's Communication's Department, The Pennsylvania State Police Department, The Pennsylvania Police Chief's Association and The Pennsylvania Chapter of the National Emergency Number Association in developing a form that is compatible with all emergency systems in the state and is still true to our original mission, to help families. As the Premise Alert Program continues, it will create a network of understanding between the many Individuals and families with special needs, their Police and First Responder Organizations, and the Human Services Agencies and Providers throughout Pennsylvania.