Clockwise, from far right: Paul Jetter, founder and chief executive officer of Safely Back Home, speaks to an audience about the benefits of enrolling in the program at a presentation at David E. Owens Middle School in New Milford; a sample shows an imprint of contact information on a sleeve of a T-shirt and, at a full display of imprinted clothes.

PHOTOS BY BERNADETTE MARNINAK AND KEVIN RILEY

NEW MILFORD

Peace of mind for caregivers of those who wander

BY TARA HOPFENSPRINGER
Correspondent

It was the “scariest time” of Carlos Pinzon’s life, said the New Milford father of three.

Two years ago, he said his younger son, Daniel, wandered away from home.

“Three different police departments were looking for him,” he went on, adding Daniel, who has special needs, eventually was found unharmed in a church in Dumont.

But, Pinzon and his family don’t worry as much now about Daniel’s habit to wander.

He wears clothes that identify who he is, should he ever get lost again.

Since last fall, the New Milford Police Department has partnered with Safely Back Home, a program providing peace of mind to families and caregivers of people who tend to wander like Daniel.

The program was created to help those with disabilities, involving getting lost or becoming easily confused. Its founder and chief executive officer, Paul Jetter, came up with the idea for the program to be used especially by people suffering from autism, Alzheimer’s or any form of dementia.

Imprints of identifying information are put on garments of the person who tends to wander.

The imprint includes the Safely Back Home logo, a unique ID number and a phone number to reach local police.

ID numbers are assigned by local police, and they connect people wearing imprinted clothes to pertinent information in the department’s database.

Jetter, of Sussex County, explained, “There’s a recent photo of that child or adult, so police can positively identify them, there’s contact information for the caregiver, and any other emergency contacts, and there’s medical information as well.”

Jetter said the program was established in Garfield, Mahwah, North Arlington and Dumont before it made its way to New Milford.

“And, the last piece is very important,” he added. “There are words, phrases or topics, given to us by the caregiver, which they know will keep the last person calm.”

Police Chief Frank Rasmeci said he was looking for a program like Safely Back Home for the borough.

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The chief said a lost person who can't communicate or identify him or herself most likely would stumble upon another citizen who would, in turn, alert the department.

"Responding officers then would identify that person by looking at his or her Safety Back Home shirt, or other clothing, and contact the department of origin," the chief said.

"In my department," he added, "we created a separate file for Safety Back Home persons. When another agency calls to say they have one of our residents who appears lost, we then can communicate and interact with that agency. We can forward their photo, and any of special care information, to that other agency."

The chief learned about the program at a meeting of the Bergen County Police Chiefs Association in June 2015, where he said he was impressed by Jetter's presentation. The chief then asked Patrolman Keith Waster and two other police officers to follow up and to explore the possibility of starting the program locally.

Wester, a 13-year veteran of the department, is school resource officer for David E. Owens Middle School.

He said he invited families who may be interested in learning more about the program to a presentation by Jetter there in October. Five families attended, and he said, "some signed up on the spot."

Last summer, a situation occurred that helped to convince Waster a program like Safety Back Home was a good idea to implement in New Milford.

Wester said an 8-year-old autistic child, being watched by his grandmother, ran out of the family's apartment.

"He jumped on a train in River Ridge and ended up in Park Ridge," Waster said. "Thank goodness a lady who saw him on the train contacted police, and his grandmother came in for help."

"If we had Safety Back Home then," he added, "we'd have saved time and resources, and it would've been much easier to reunite the boy with his grandmother."

Plunzo and his wife, Claudia, enrolled Daniel in the program in the fall.

Plunzo said he believes the program is successful in New Milford because it's linked to law enforcement.

"I had to register my kids with the police department," Plunzo said. "I like that they know I have special-needs kids in my home, because if a call goes to them about an incident at my house, they know who's there and what to expect. They can send someone prepared or trained to deal with it."

"If we need to find someone," Plunzo said. "For these cases, we've found that this program worked well."

The program "has a partnership in place with Project Lifesaver International, which uses radio-tracking bracelets and search-and-rescue teams to find lost people."

"We met with people at Project Lifesaver International," Jetter said. "We decided on Safety Back Home perfect complements what they already do. People can sign up solely for Safety Back Home, or use it in conjunction with Project Lifesaver."

To enroll in Safety Back Home in New Milford, call Jetter at 201-374-4054, or the New Milford Police Department at 201-261-1900. Registration forms are available at police headquarters, 930 River Road.