

## SJSO CARE Program

### Advocating for Our County's Seniors

In 2005, when Sheriff David Shoar took office, he realized that the senior population in our county was rapidly increasing, and that these seniors may become vulnerable to crime. In response, he initiated the Community and Advocacy Resources for the Elderly, or CARE, program.

Advocates who participate in the CARE program visit with county seniors—many of whom may be shut-ins or may not have family nearby—to see if they have safety, personal, or medical needs that are not being met.

The St. Johns County Sheriff's Office relies on two energetic "senior advocates" who visit with the seniors who are enrolled in the program. Mary Alice Colson joined CARE early on, and Linda Koch joined in 2010. Both women are strong supporters of the program.

"We recognize the needs of our clients and provide them with helpful resources in the community," Colson said. Koch agreed.

"I believe CARE is one of the best programs we have right now. Working together with our local community agencies, we have been able to make a difference in our clients' lives, whether it is simply sitting there listening to them or finding the resources that they need to make their lives more comfortable," Koch said.

Referrals come into the agency through several different community organizations that deal with seniors, including Council on Aging, Catholic Charities, and home health care companies. Referrals can also come in from deputies on the road who encounter situations in which seniors need assistance with different problems.

Once a referral comes in, an initial visit is made to determine if the senior meets the qualifications necessary to become part of the program. If the person qualifies, he or she is added to the database kept at SJSO and is set up for scheduled visits.

Many seniors rely heavily on the visits from these two women and use the program as their lifeline.

"If you don't go, they get upset," Colson said. "You become their companion."

But the program is more than just companionship and social visits. Koch and Colson both agree that they also fight to provide seniors what they need, whether it's donated food or an eye exam.

“One client had not had glasses in over six years and couldn’t watch television or read the newspaper simply because she couldn’t see. I was able to find a resource for her and she got new glasses. We had to arrange our visits around her TV shows,” Koch said.

“As part of the program, we recognize the different types of crimes and scams that target the elderly. The CARE program also offers services by deputies to conduct surveys of elderly citizens’ homes to make these residents less vulnerable to crime,” Colson said.

Colson and Koch took an extra step during preparations for Hurricane Matthew, which hit St. Johns County hard. They called every one of their clients to make sure they were safe, and they provided their seniors with provisions if they opted to ride out the storm instead of evacuating.

“We brought them water and food,” Colson said. “We made sure they had everything they needed.”

Many of the clients of the CARE program can’t sing the praises of Colson and Koch loudly enough.

“Miss Linda came for a first visit representing the CARE program at SJSO and was so concerned about the fact that there was no heat in my trailer. I had put in applications everywhere in town for affordable housing but was never accepted. Miss Linda was able to use her resources and get me an apartment at Southern Villas, where I still am today,” senior Robbie Reynolds said.

The kind words don’t stop there.

“I am 85 years old, and Mary Alice Colson’s visits have been a blessing to me for three years ... I love and trust her, and she has always been there for me. I can depend on her without question,” Jan Scott said.

The CARE program had only two clients in 2006 during its beginnings, but now has 35 clients and is continuing to grow. In addition to visits and help with their needs, the seniors participating in CARE also receive an invitation to a Christmas luncheon every year, where they get a chance to see Santa and have lunch with members of the St. Johns County Sheriff’s Office. They leave with a gift from the office as well.

CARE is Sheriff Shoar’s most prized program, and he is committed to making sure the seniors in our county stay safe and comfortable. It’s just another way we are *Taking Care of People*.

-Jamie Johnson

St Johns County Sheriff’s Office