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LOCAL NEWS

Registry helps track down next of kin

By **DEIRDRE NEWMAN - Staff Writer**

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"To say I was devastated is an understatement," said Cerney, 38, a former Marine who lives in Temecula with his wife and three children. Attuned to the plethora of technological options available these days, he wondered why no system existed to notify relatives of people who were either dead or injured, but couldn't speak for themselves.

The terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, reinforced his conviction that something was lacking in the ability to notify family when emergency response officials were carrying bodies out of the rubble of the World Trade Center and people didn't know if their relatives were among the dead, he said.

Inspired to act, he enlisted his wife to help him in his effort. They originally intended to find someone else who was already working to expedite the contact process so they could help promote the service. But they couldn't find anything remotely like that, he said. So they decided to do it themselves.

They created the National Next of Kin Registry, a free service that takes advantage of the Internet to provide peace of mind to the family and friends information for people who are missing, injured or dead. To date, about 4 million people, most in the United States, have registered, he added.

While the service is listed on the front page of the California state Web site and is also accessible on FirstGov.gov, the federal government's Web portal, officials with both the California Highway Patrol headquarters in Sacramento and the California State Coroners Association said they hadn't heard of it.

How it works

To register, people visit the Web site and enter information on themselves and their relatives or family members and their emergency contact information. The information is kept secure and only certain agencies can access it, Cerney said.

Registrants then print out a card that shows they are a member of the site. Those who mail in their applications also receive a decal that shows they're registered that can be affixed to driver's licenses and identification cards, Cerney said.

If anything happens to the people registered on the site, law enforcement and coroners who request authorization to access the site then have a quick and easy way to obtain emergency contact information, Cerney said.

"Once you leave home, if something happens, who will be contacted?" he said. "Would (authorities) know who to contact automatically? These agencies have a lot of resources.

This is just a direct point of contact. It's not the solution, but it's a good first step." Ultimately he would like the service to be so well-known and well-used that agencies access it automatically ---- even when it's not obvious that someone has registered, he said. And, the service is free, a rarity these days.

"Some individuals don't have the means," Cerney said. "If you're affluent or homeless, I think you deserve the benefit of dignity if something happens to you." Anyone could jot down their emergency contact information and stick it in their wallet, Cerney acknowledged, but he created the system as a wake-up call to motivate people to consider the issue on a large scale, he said.

"There's no collaborative effort to get people across the U.S. to think about that proactively," he said.

The service is also beneficial for those with cell phones who are not listed in the phone book, said Mel Mulligan, a friend of Cerney's and member of the organization's board of directors.

"How does law enforcement or other agencies track down next of kin in that kind of situation?" Mulligan asked.

Quite a few homeless people have registered, specifying that they don't have a permanent address and entering identifying information such as scars or tattoos, as well as emergency contact information, Cerney said.

The organization also has volunteers who fan out to places such as churches and convalescent centers and give people there information on how to register, Cerney said.

Gary Tindel, president of the California State Coroners Association, said the idea is a good one because coroners typically try all kinds of ways to dig up emergency contact information.

"We have problems every week with death cases trying to find next of kin," he said.

Labor of love

After launching the service in Washington state about a year and a half ago, Cerney and his wife, Kerri, plunked \$95,000 into the nonprofit from the sale of their home and moved south.

They moved to Temecula in July because they believed Southern California would be a strategic area to serve the state, which is all they intended to do at first, Mark Cerney said. It was also a way to get back home because he is originally from San Diego and his wife is from Riverside.

But the service grew so fast that it quickly outgrew California, he said. It is now available in 28 states, with 14 others pending, Cerney said, adding that they're working on getting the rest of the country online as well.

He works in a home office where he can sit at his desk sans shoes, as he did during an interview in early May. His home office has shelves crammed with a collection of Coca-Cola items that came from one of his favorite uncles, he said.

As a former Marine, Cerney is used to dealing with stress. But being part of such traumatic events in people's lives has taken a toll, he said.

"I cry a lot," he said. "It's disheartening. We get phone calls and e-mails every day about people missing," he said.

The next goal for the nonprofit is to raise \$5 million for a Reach Out to America campaign, a grassroots effort to let people throughout the country know that the service is available, with an emphasis on educating rural America, he said.

Similar efforts

A frustrating experience of not knowing what befell a loved one happened to Laura Greenwald, CEO of the Next of Kin Education Project, when her grandmother was hospitalized after a fall in Illinois and the hospital didn't contact her or her mother for 6 1/2 days. Her grandmother died before they could get to the hospital, she said.

Like Cerney and his wife, Greenwald, along with her mother, decided to fill the void. With the help of state legislators, they wrote legislation for California and Illinois that says when a patient who is unconscious or unable to give consent is admitted to a hospital, the staff has to call the next-of-kin or some emergency contact within 24 hours.

The law was enacted in both states in 2001, Greenwald said. They also helped craft federal next-of-kin legislation that was recently introduced in the House of Representatives. It requires hospitals that receive Medicare funding to make "reasonable efforts" to get in touch with family members and other emergency contacts of an incapacitated patient within 24 hours of arrival.

In trying to help hospitals access emergency contact information for patients, they used the National Next of Kin Registry as an example of a potential resource for hospital staff. But the service isn't quite ready for hospitals to access the Web site, Mark Cerney said. The Cerneys are working on creating a monitoring and accountability system so more industries, such as hospitals, can access the registry, he said.

Greenwald and her mother, Janet, are fans of Cerney's Web site, Laura Greenwald said. "We really thought there should be some sort of a database where hospitals could go and find that information easily. ...We contacted (Mark) and said, 'This is great,'" Greenwald said.

And Mark Cerney gave kudos to the Greenwalds for trying to turn their misfortune into a federal law that can help people throughout the country. "I really feel for their family what they've gone through," he said. "She and her mom have done really fantastic things in enacting laws in California and Illinois. Their tenacity is paying off. And having accountability for all these hospitals across the country, I think it's fantastic."

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