

What Is This Group Called "TRIAD"?

By Cpl. Sharen Underwood

Having been a member of the Rutland County Sheriff's Department for almost 18 years, I have served in many of its positions and participated in most of its programs. Like you, I am watching the demographic trend toward an older population in Vermont and the United States. This trend will soon affect all phases of our life, from the economy (when baby boomers start cashing in their financial savings) to health care (when they need long-term care) to highway safety (when one in four drivers will be over 65 yrs.). Sheriff R.J. Elrick's response to this trend was to support the formation of a TRIAD program—joining over 700 such programs in existence in the United States.

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Senior Picnic, 2003, at Castleton College.

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Some TRIADS include senior service providers in their programs, as does the Rutland County TRIAD. Our program is run by the SALT (Seniors And Law enforcement Together) Council, which meets monthly and gives direction to the activities of TRIAD. Our TRIAD is patterned after the national "model", but each TRIAD in the United States will look different, depending on the needs of the seniors in the area and the capabilities of the staff working in the program.

I am often asked what TRIAD stands for. The best I can determine, the first such program started in 1988 in a parish in Louisiana where the local Sheriff felt a need to work with his large senior population. The program was so successful that it was quickly noticed at the national level by the National Sheriffs Association, the International Association of Chiefs of Police and the AARP. Those three groups signed a formal agreement to support and foster TRIAD programs.

The rest is the history of how 775 TRIADS have formed around the country and internationally. The TRIAD program has often been called community policing for seniors.

Nationally, TRIADS are mostly creatures of Sheriff's Departments, but it is not unusual to find them being sponsored by Police departments or local Councils on Aging or RSVP (Retired and Senior Volunteer Program) programs. In some of the larger police and sheriffs departments, it is common to find up to 50 senior volunteers doing paperwork, filing, typing and other tasks that leave officers more time on the road. Because they are involved, these seniors are supportive of our work and are benefited from the crime prevention and safety activities that the departments conduct under the TRIAD program.

The Rutland County TRIAD was started in October of 1997 when all of the Rutland County law enforcement agency heads signed a cooperative agreement to support the program. (Some of those agencies are no longer active participants because of time and budget constraints, but the program is thriving.) The SALT Council was formed. I invited leaders in the Rutland area from all walks of life (law enforcement, politics, state's attorneys, clergy, Retired and Senior ►

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More than 400 seniors attended the 2003 picnic.

Volunteer Program, Southwestern Vermont Council on Aging, Rutland Regional Medical Center, Rutland Area Visiting Nurses and Hospice, the Godnick Adult Center, and several at-large senior citizens who had the time and energy to volunteer). I met with an initial SALT Council of 21 members and explained the concept to them. I brought in a speaker from a very successful TRIAD in Northampton, Mass. He fired them up with possibilities for the program. They wanted to try everything Dave told them about.

Our first activity was to survey our senior population to determine what their fears and concerns were surrounding crime issues, and to learn what they thought of possible solutions. The SALT Council then began to organize activities to meet those concerns. We invested in "Safe Alert" porch light bulbs, which act

as a regular porch light until an emergency occurs. If the homeowner has called 911, he then flips the porch light switch three times and the porch light becomes a flashing light. Ends all of the incidents where the emergency vehicle (police, fire, ambulance) drives by several times trying to locate the house!! We give these bulbs free to citizens who participate in our Safe at Home program. That program is similar to many home invasion prevention programs. We have developed a checklist to use when the deputy visits a home for an inspection, at the homeowner's request. Whatever anti-burglary suggestions we make for the residence are recorded on the checklist and a copy is left with the homeowner, along with the Safe Alert bulb and general crime prevention literature.

One of our most successful activities

is the Senior Picnic. About five years ago, we partnered with the local Meals on Wheels caterer and ran an all day picnic. Fitz-Vogt did the BBQ lunch and TRIAD did the activities of the day. We had demonstrations going on all day: K-9, fire service demonstrating fire awareness activities, self-defense (the RAD program), the Care Track system, radar operation and other law enforcement and non-law enforcement demos. Our first two Senior picnics were at the Police Academy and the last three have been at Castleton College. We are now also running mini-seminars (45 minutes each) at the picnic, and we have at least 20 exhibitors from service agencies and private businesses. All labor and materials are donated, including a fleet of 4 golf carts to transport seniors from the parking area to the picnic site, DJ services, door prizes, soda and picnic supplies, tents, tables and chairs. The day is educational and entertaining and gives law enforcement agencies a chance to work together and spotlight their special programs. The attendance is usually around 400 seniors.

In March, TRIAD held our second annual Senior Seminar Day. This day is organized in the same manner as a professional conference; only the topics are of interest to ordinary senior citizens. We have law enforcement related topics to choose from (such as Identity Theft), exercise topics (Bone Builders, walking), and medical topics (Medicaid planning, Memory loss) to choose from. Lunch is included and we end the day with a speaker who is a humorist and who sends us away with a smile on our faces. The partici-



Seniors visiting the exhibits at the picnic.



K-9 demonstration: detecting drugs in a vehicle.

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pation is limited to 100 seniors because of facility size. They attend 3 seminars of their choice from among 11 topics.

Under the TRIAD umbrella, I speak at senior centers and housing complexes on a variety of safety and law enforcement topics including identity theft, telemarketing and other frauds, personal safety and winter safety. I usually speak to groups at least twice a month. In conjunction with RSVP, we use the local public access TV station, Channel 15, to produce programs highlighting upcoming TRIAD events.

Another TRIAD activity that has generated a lot of interest is our Senior ID Card program. Begun in conjunction with Castleton State College, we produced a picture ID card containing medical and contact information. The card was designed to be worn when a senior was out walking and would be used by emergency responders should there be a medical problem. Its uses now include everything from check-cashing ID to a second ID when boarding a plane. We now produce high quality cards on a machine donated by the Rutland Kiwanis club for use with child ID's, senior ID's and our local law enforcement officers' ID cards.

Our latest challenge was to enlist local gas stations and mini-marts to pump gas for seniors rather than have them struggle with self-service pumps. This has been well received. We have 12 stations participating. It is the only program of its kind that I could find in Vermont. Each gas station decides what hours their staffing will allow them to assist seniors with pumping and how they want to be notified that a senior is at the pumps and needs assistance. They write that information on a TRIAD magnetic sign attached to each gas pump. So simple, yet so necessary for some.

The Rutland Sheriff's Department has also started the "Are You Okay?" program for seniors and others who are alone and fragile. This is an automated telephone dialer that calls subscribers once a day at a preset time. The subscriber needs to pick up the receiver and listen to any message you choose. Failure to answer the phone indicates that there

may be a health emergency with that subscriber. Procedures for checking on him/her are begun. The system is in use in many agencies in the United States and here in Vermont and has saved many lives. It is a free service.

The composition and activities of a TRIAD are limited only by the imagination of the people running it. So far, all of our programs are free because we have obtained community support and partnered with business and social service agencies. My time is compensated by the Sheriff's Department in the same way as is the public relations/education officer in many departments. The Rutland American Legion Post has "adopted" the TRIAD concept and they support us regularly with some funding for our programs. "TRIAD" is finally becoming a recognized word in Rutland, but it took many hours of public speaking to various civic groups and much media coverage over the years for that to happen.

Finally, it bears repeating that, as the senior population increases, senior citizens will be a greater percentage of our victims, witnesses and even perpetrators! Some of these seniors have sensory deficits. Officers will experience increased numbers of contacts with the senior population. Some officers will handle this reality well, but others need tools to help them interact more effectively. I have developed a two hour block of training that will give deputies and officers insight and practical assistance with those law enforcement interactions. Sheriff Elrick is willing to send me to your agency to do this training. Additionally, I am available to assist any agency with the start-up of a TRIAD program. I have a wealth of written information and suggestions borne of our experience, should your agency decide that it is time to target senior citizens for special attention. Twenty years ago we focused on women. Fifteen years ago we focused on children. Now is time to focus on seniors! □

FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT TRIAD, OR TO ARRANGE FOR TRAINING: Contact Cpl. Sharen Underwood at: sunderwo@dps.state.vt.us or at (802) 786-0037, or at the Rutland County Sheriffs Department, P.O. Box 303, Rutland, VT 05702.