

## Wiltshire Police Enhance Protection for the Vulnerable...

Wiltshire Police has always provided high standards of protection to vulnerable individuals such as those at risk from domestic violence, and is constantly looking for ways in which this protection can be enhanced and made more efficient.

Until recently, the main type of protection for at-risk individuals used by Wiltshire Police was fixed alarm units within their homes. However, these provided no protection for victims away from home, which severely limited their effectiveness. To address this problem, the force carried out an extensive evaluation of portable personal safety devices and services.

Personal safety devices provide victims with an enhanced sense of security – a “virtual sanctuary” – which enables them to carry on with their normal lives and also, in many cases, eliminates the need for disruptive relocation. An extensive review of the systems available confirmed that the versatility of the devices was an important factor; for example, the automatic capture and transmission of GPS location data and two-way audio facilities. The use of the GPRS high-speed mobile data network for communication was important, but the ability to automatically fall back to the GSM service in areas where no GPRS signal is available was also a great benefit.

It was also important that the devices themselves were backed up by an efficient and comprehensive response service. This needed to combine the shortest possible response time with effective victim support, while capturing all of the incident-related data and audio that may be of use to the police.

Wiltshire Police identified Skyguard’s personal safety devices as meeting all the necessary criteria and a pilot trial involving ten units was implemented. When this proved satisfactory Wiltshire Police ordered a further 50 units and these are now used to protect potential victims of domestic violence but, on a small number of occasions, they have also been issued to witnesses requiring additional protection.

“Apart from their ability to work almost anywhere, another benefit of these portable devices is that they require no installation,” said Detective Inspector Tim Corner of the Wiltshire Police Public Protection Department in Swindon.

“The fixed units we were using previously took an officer at least an hour to install, whereas with portable personal safety devices setting up takes just a few minutes, and that includes the time it takes to show the user how the unit

operates.”

The high level of confidence that the units provide for at-risk persons was demonstrated recently when a user made an alarm call because she thought she had seen her previous assailant approaching her. As it turned out, she was mistaken, but using the unit’s two-way audio facility and working with the GPS co-ordinates that it had provided, Wiltshire Police were able to give the user an accurate and detailed description of her surroundings, even though she was away from her home.

The units have also proved their worth in situations where there was no input from the user. In two recent cases, protected individuals were thought to have gone missing. In the first instance, the user’s unit was interrogated remotely by the control centre to ascertain its GPS co-ordinates. With this information, the user was found quickly and easily.

In the second instance, a similar remote interrogation attempt failed, as the user had not ensured that the batteries of their unit were properly charged. However, by looking at the stored GPS data sent from the unit before the batteries expired, the Skyguard team was able to work out the movements of the user in the time leading up to their supposed disappearance. Once again, this provided Wiltshire Police with all of the information they needed to locate them quickly.

DI Corner concludes: “The ‘virtual sanctuary’ that the devices provide means that not only can at-risk persons remain living in their own homes, which is always preferable, but also offers them the same level of protection whenever they leave their house. Furthermore, the information provided by the units and their support services helps us to respond to incidents rapidly and efficiently, thereby ensuring that we meet our primary objective of providing the best possible service to all members of the public.”