



UNIVERSITY OF
WATERLOO

CASES OF PERSONS LIVING WITH DEMENTIA WHO GET LOST AND GO MISSING IN CANADA

May 2025



Public Safety
Canada

Sécurité publique
Canada



7. A musician with possible dementia becomes disoriented walking home

Personal information

Name: Vira Melnyk.

Age: 82 years old.

Gender: Woman, pronouns are she/her.

Living situation: Lives in a single-family home with her husband in Spruce Grove, a suburb of Edmonton, Alberta.

Social support: Walter, her husband of 56 years, and adult children Karina, Jacob, and Anna.

Health: Suspected dementia, arthritis, knee replacement, cataracts. Takes medicated eye drops and pain relievers.

Interests: Singing in choir, playing piano, volunteering at community activities, and spending time with her family.



Background

Vira's life and family

Vira and Walter are well-known for their volunteer pursuits and church involvement. They have three children: Karina, who talks with them daily and visits on weekends; Jacob, who lives in the same suburb as his parents; and Anna, who lives in Toronto and visits twice a year.

Vira's memory changes

In the last two years, Walter has noticed Vira becoming more forgetful. She has missed taking medications, repeats stories, has difficulty remembering discussions, and has left her purse at church a few times.

Vira resists seeking medical advice

Vira is embarrassed about her memory problems and has asked Walter to keep them private. Walter worries he is not giving her the support she needs.



The day of the incident

– Getting lost

1. Vira walks to church

One day in early April, Vira plans to walk to the church to meet the music director at 2:30 pm. It is a beautiful spring day. Walter reminds her that he would like to take out some cash to add to the Easter baskets they are preparing for their grandchildren. Vira offers to withdraw the cash from the bank since it is on her way to church.

2. Vira withdraws cash from the bank

Vira walks to the bank, withdraws the money as planned, and bumps into a familiar face. Although she cannot remember the woman's name, she recalls the woman is an old friend and fellow music teacher.

3. Vira and her friend spend time together

The woman invites Vira to come with her to Edmonton to pick up music books. Vira feels she should be doing something else but agrees because she enjoys browsing for books.

4. Vira becomes disoriented upon return to Spruce Grove

After being dropped off in Spruce Grove by her friend, Vira remembers she was supposed to attend the choir meeting. Embarrassed, she rushes to the church but becomes disoriented. The street looks different due to the new development of crescent streets, and she feels like she is walking in circles. She looks at her watch and realizes it is 5:00 pm.

5. Vira slips and falls into a ditch

Vira sees a field in the distance and thinks it is near her home. The sun is setting, and the air is getting cooler. She enters the field, slips on the muddy path, and falls into a ditch. Her right arm is sore, and she cannot stand up. She calls for help, but no one responds.

The day of the incident

– Being found

1. Walter searches for Vira and calls the police

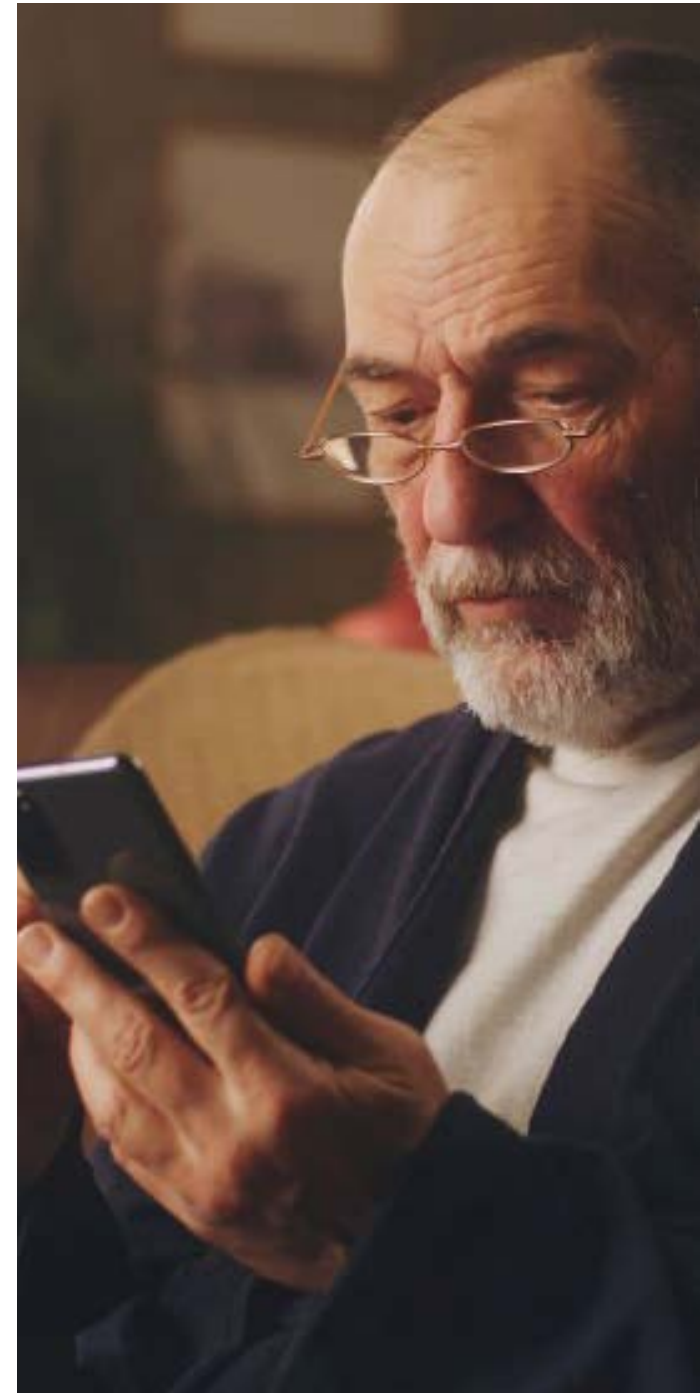
Walter arrives home at 6:00 pm and is surprised that Vira is not there. He drives to the church, finds it locked, and calls the music director, who confirms that Vira did not attend the meeting. Walter calls his children. They have not heard from Vira. Walter knows this is an emergency and calls the police to report that Vira is missing.

2. A police officer finds Vira

David, a police officer, has been assigned to monitor the safety on the highway. At 7:30 pm, he pulls into the highway turnout on the outskirts of the Spruce Grove suburb. He heard about a missing older woman on the police radio earlier. As he steps out of his car, he hears someone calling for help. He finds Vira in the ditch, and she says she is lost. David radios police headquarters, a dispatcher calls an ambulance and Walter.

3. Walter arrives and Vira is taken to the hospital

The ambulance arrives, and Vira is taken to the hospital for assessment. Walter arrives at the scene, relieved that Vira has been found.



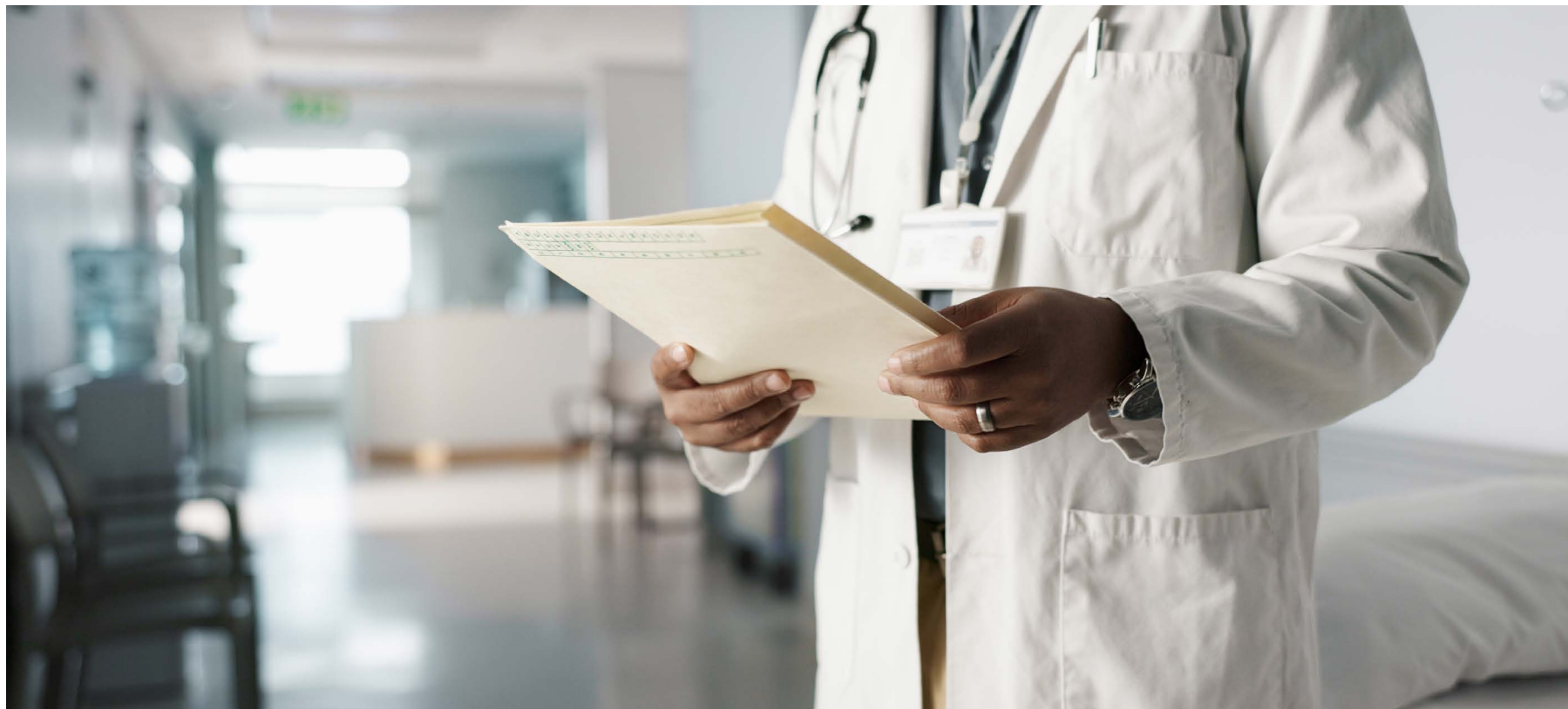
After the incident

Vira is willing to see a doctor

The incident makes Walter realize that Vira's cognitive challenges need to be addressed. Walter explains his concerns to Vira. While she is still reluctant, she agrees to speak with her doctor.

The couple create a safety plan

Vira and Walter create a safety plan, which includes carrying each other's contact details and completing the Herbert protocol (see resources for additional information). Walter will remind Vira to charge and carry the cell phone. He also decides to investigate wearable GPS locator devices as a backup plan. These devices can be used to help locate a person who is lost or missing.



Resources

It is helpful to collect information about the person at risk of going missing before a missing incident occurs. This information can help first responders to find a person who goes missing.

The Herbert Protocol is a document in which important information is gathered. It has been implemented in various parts of Canada and Scotland. The Calgary Missing Older Adult Resource Network provides the Herbert Protocol form (see pages 15-20). missingseniors.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Resource-guide-for-people-at-risk-of-going-missing.pdf.

For some people, it can be difficult to share information about their memory challenges or dementia with others, including family members. The Alzheimer Society of Canada has created a resource called “Talking about your diagnosis” that outlines strategies for communicating with others. alzheimer.ca/en/help-support/im-living-dementia/talking-about-your-diagnosis.



Resources

Toolkit to manage the risk of getting lost and going missing for people living with dementia.

This toolkit contains strategies to help with the common concerns of people living with dementia and their care partners regarding the risks of becoming lost.

Emergency card

People living with dementia can carry an “In Case of Emergency” card. It has important information to help them if they go missing. This card was made by the [Calgary Missing Older adult Resource Network](#), see page 16.

The Herbert Protocol

Important details about the person at risk can be gathered in The Herbert Protocol. This information can help first responders when someone is missing. Keep this information at home on your fridge and give it to care partners. Click this link to access the ‘[Resource Guide for Older Adults at Risk of Going Missing](#)’; fill out the form on pages 15-20.

Safety and leisure activities

Balancing leisure time with safety can be challenging. [The Canadian Guideline for Safe Wandering](#) provides strategies to promote safe wandering and manage the risk of getting lost when doing leisure activities.

Driving with dementia

It can be challenging to drive a car when the driver has a hard time remembering, navigating, and attending to the environment. This [Driving and Dementia Roadmap](#) includes safety considerations related to driving with dementia.

In Case of Emergency	
Full Name	_____
Date of Birth	_____ Blood type _____
Address	_____
Cell	_____ Work _____ Home _____
Current Meds	_____
Conditions	_____
Physician	_____ Phone _____
Allergy/additional info	_____
In Case of Emergency	
Emergency Contact #1	_____
Relationship	_____ Work Phone _____
Cell Phone	_____ Work Phone _____
Emergency Contact #1	_____
Relationship	_____ Work Phone _____
Cell Phone	_____ Work Phone _____
Additional Info	_____
_____ Last updated _____	

Locator devices

Locator devices help people living with dementia share their location with family in case they are lost. They may also help the police find people should they go missing. The [Alzheimer Society of Canada](#) shares more information about the purposes of locator devices. The [University of Waterloo Aging and Innovation Research Program](#) outlines features of locator devices, including cost and battery life.

What to do if you find a missing person

A missing incident is an emergency. Call police and ask the operator or service how you can help. [A video from Dementia Network Calgary](#) outlines a missing incident involving a person living with dementia and how to help.

Links

- **Toolkit** to manage the risk of getting lost and going missing for people living with dementia, made by the University of Waterloo. <https://uwaterloo.ca/managing-risks-of-disappearance-in-persons-living-with-dementia/toolkit-0>
- **“In Case of Emergency” card** made by Calgary Missing Older Adult Resource Network. See page 14. <https://missingseniors.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Resource-guide-for-people-at-risk-of-going-missing.pdf>
- **The Herbert Protocol** described by Calgary Missing Older Adult Resource Network. See pages 15-20. <https://missingseniors.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Resource-guide-for-people-at-risk-of-going-missing.pdf>
- **The Canadian Guideline for Safe Wandering.** https://canadiansafewandering.ca/#more_information
- **The Driving and Dementia Roadmap.** <https://www.drivinganddementia.ca/>
- **Locator device overview**, as described by the Alzheimer Society of Canada. <https://alzheimer.ca/en/help-support/im-caring-person-living-dementia/ensuring-safety-security/tracking-devices>
- **Locator device features**, as described by the University of Waterloo Aging and Innovation Research Program. <https://uwaterloo.ca/aging-innovation-research-program/locator-devices>
- **What to do if you find a missing person.** Dementia Network Calgary’s video dementianetworkcalgary.ca/



For more information

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