

21 agencies band together to find missing Richmond County man

First Posted: 9:11 pm - March 7th, 2016

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Covington



William R. Toler | Daily Journal First responders search a wooded area for Alvin Covington.

ROCKINGHAM — A massive search on Monday turned up no clues as to what happened to a man who went missing more than five months ago.

More than 80 people from 21 public and private agencies gathered at 8 a.m. on the site of the future Northside Volunteer Fire Department station for a briefing in the search for 57-year-old Alvin “Bent” Benson Covington.

Covington — who suffers from early stages of dementia — was last seen Sept. 25 at the Food Lion on U.S. 1 wearing a blue shirt, blue jeans and dark-colored hat, but wasn’t reported missing until Oct. 6, according to Capt. Jay Childers with the Richmond County Sheriff’s Office.

Deputies say Covington’s family waited to file an official report because he had gone missing before. In 2014, he was gone for 20 days and later found in Lee County.

Childers said there were also reports of Covington being seen in the Little Philadelphia community and areas of Cartledge Creek Road and Northside Drive, but those sightings couldn’t be validated.

STAGING A SEARCH

Detectives David Wall and Mitchell Watson led the search effort from the staging area, with Richmond County Emergency Services Director Donna Wright and her crew helping to coordinate the resources.

Each individual’s name was taken down, so those back at the Moore County Mobile Command Center knew who was with which team and where they were.

“This is the largest operation we’ve had to do,” said Wright, both in terms of area and number of searchers.



William R. Toler | Daily Journal Richard Lassiter uses a compass to determine where his team should come out.



William R. Toler | Daily Journal Buddy, a cadaver dog from Southern Pride Search Dogs in Clyde, sniffs a blue shirt that was found during the search.

A total of 17 search grids were established, covering roughly 6½ square miles: 10 on the west side of the highway, south of Harrington Road and mostly east of Cartledge Creek Road, where Covington lived; and seven on the east side of U.S. 220, south of Northside Drive, where he had friends.

Deputies say Covington's cellphone last pinged off the tower on Northam Road.

Cadaver dogs from Southern Pride Search Dogs, based in the western part of the state, sniffed around several of the 20 small ponds located within the search area.

Around 12:40 p.m., Cordova Fire and Rescue Chief Ray Webb and his crew left to scour the area just south of Harrington Road on ATVs.

BRIARS AND BRAMBLES

A team made up mainly of members of Hamlet Fire and Rescue and the Hamlet Police Department regrouped after searching an area of thick brush near Cartledge Creek Road to look around Stelley Tabernacle Church Road.

Firemen Richard Lassiter and Justin Pruitt, each with a compass, led the team through briars, up and down hills, over fences and around two ponds.

Hamlet Police Chief Scott Waters searched through a block building and a house that appeared to have been abandoned during construction. Other members of the team peered into an abandoned mobile home for signs of the missing man.

During the hike, Lassiter acknowledged that Covington could have been buried under the thick bed of leaves that lay on the ground.

A woman living on Stelley Tabernacle Church Road told Hamlet Fire Chief Calvin White that she had smelled a rotting odor behind her home and led him to a bone. White and Waters later found a blue shirt nearby.

"It could've been his, you never know," White said after finding it. "It could have been just a shirt."

A cadaver dog was brought to the site of the shirt and sniffed around, but didn't go very far.



William R. Toler | Daily Journal Detective David Wall, right, points out on a map taped to the command center where he wants the Hamlet team to search.



Childers later said all possible clues found on Monday, including the bone and the shirt, were ruled out.

THE SEARCH CONTINUES

As night began to fall, the search was suspended for the day.

Other agencies assisting in the effort included: Ash-Rand Rescue, the N.C. Department of Corrections K-9 Unit and Prison Emergency Response Team, Ellerbe Fire Department, Ellerbe Rescue, Rockingham Rescue, Scotland Rescue, Pineland Search and Rescue, East Rockingham Fire Department, N.C. Emergency Management, N.C. State Bureau of Investigation Air Wing, the Lilesville Fire Department, the Marlboro County Sheriff's Office, the Rockingham Police Department and the American Red Cross.

Kenny Caulder also donated the use of several four-wheelers.

Although nothing was found, deputies say they will continue to look for Covington.

Today, deputies say a crew from Lee County will be using sonar to search the ponds and the N.C. Highway Patrol will be scanning the ground from a helicopter.

"I hope he's alive, you just don't know," Waters said. "I know the family wants closure, one way or the other (and) we want that for them."

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