Living alone can be tough for seniors. Some don’t have family nearby to check on them, and they worry that if they fall or suffer a medical emergency and can't get to the phone to seek help, no one will know.

That’s why hundreds of police agencies in small towns, suburbs and rural areas across the country are checking in on seniors who live alone by offering them a free automated phone call every day.

Police officials say the computerized calling systems, which are fairly inexpensive and easy to use, provide an important service to a growing senior population that is expected to reach 65 million by 2025. Already, nearly half of women age 75 and older live alone.

And advocates for older adults say telephone check-in programs can help seniors remain independent in their homes and give them — and their family members — peace of mind.

“It helps ensure for the elderly person or their family that a phone call is being made every morning, that everything is OK. We’ve gotten incredible feedback on this program,” said Cmdr. Jack Vaccaro, of the Lighthouse Point Police Department in Florida, which has nine seniors in its automated daily call program.

Automated telephone reassurance systems for seniors began nearly three decades ago. They have grown in popularity in recent years and now are used by police departments from California to Massachusetts.

Some police agencies take a more personal approach, using volunteers or dispatchers to place the calls.
Police departments are becoming more sensitive in responding to the needs of older adults, said Sandy Markwood, CEO of the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging. For instance, she said, they are training officers in how to handle seniors with dementia. Telephone check-in programs are another way of doing that.

“I think we’re seeing a trend with these types of programs, particularly in rural and smaller communities,” she said. “It’s a wise use of government dollars for first responders.”

**Daily Calls**

Seniors who sign up for telephone reassurance programs decide when they want to be called. They typically are required to give police the name and phone number of an emergency contact.

Participants get a computer-generated phone call every day — sometimes recorded by the police chief or sheriff — that asks them to press a certain number if they are OK. If they don’t answer the phone, they’ll get another computer-generated call, and sometimes additional ones.

If they still don’t answer, police usually will try to get in touch with their emergency contact before dispatching an officer to the home to check on them.

Seniors who know they’re going to be out when the phone rings at the specified time are supposed to notify police in advance. But sometimes they forget, and dispatchers end up sending out a unit on a false call. While that does happen, police officials say it’s not a frequent occurrence so the personnel costs are minimal.

Some agencies, such as the Winter Park, Florida, Police Department, also require participants to put a copy of their house key in a secured box similar to ones used by real estate agents, that is placed somewhere around the outside of the house. Emergency responders know the code and can open the box and enter the house, if necessary.

The price tag for telephone reassurance systems varies.

RUOK, the nation’s largest telephone reassurance system, is used by hundreds of police agencies, according to Bruce Johnson, owner of the Minnesota company that developed and sells the software. It costs about $1,000 to buy and set up and has no maintenance fees.

Database Systems Corp., a Phoenix-based data management company that has sold its CARE Call Reassurance system to dozens of police departments, charges nearly $11,000 for purchase, installation and the first year of maintenance, Vice President Jerry Pizet said. After that, most agencies do their own maintenance.

Winter Park Police Officer Randall Morrissey said his agency uses RUOK software that runs on an old laptop and was paid for with forfeiture funds. Running the program doesn’t cost the department anything, he said, other than the cost of sending out an officer on a false call, which isn’t often.

“A lot of the seniors who sign up are concerned that they could pass and not be discovered for days,” Morrissey said. “With this program, it’s comforting for them to know they could be found.”
That was the reason the Belton Police Department in Texas launched its telephone check-in program in 2013, according to Detective Sgt. Kim Hamilton. The impetus: an incident in which officers found an elderly woman who had been dead on the floor of her home for at least two months without anyone knowing or checking on her.

“That alone spoke volumes to us,” Hamilton said. “We knew there was a need to check on our senior residents.”

‘Economy of Scale’

The check-in programs are less common in big cities, where large numbers of people might sign up, potentially straining budgets because more officers would be needed to check on seniors who don’t answer their phones.

But in small cities and towns, suburbs and rural areas, the programs can be more manageable.

“It’s economy of scale,” said Capt. Larry Murphy, of the Biloxi, Mississippi, Police Department. “With more people, the percentage of false alarms goes up and you’ve got to send out units there. If you’re in a really large city, you’d have to add more and more resources.”

In Biloxi, a city of about 44,000, only 14 seniors are registered for its telephone check-in program. While many police departments want to sign up as many seniors as possible, Murphy said his tries to limit its program to “people who really need it rather than those who just want it.”

Murphy said the automated call system has experienced on and off outages in the last few years because of lightning damage to the dispatch center. That means dispatchers sometimes have to personally call each senior, which is “resource-intensive but manageable” with a limited number of participants.

Some police agencies that once used automated check-in systems, such as those in Brentwood, Missouri, and Amherst, Massachusetts, have stopped using them. Agencies that choose to give up the systems usually do it because participants move away or die and not enough seniors sign up to replace them.

Police officials agree that for telephone reassurance programs to succeed in the long term, they need to be continuously marketed to new seniors. Some departments do that by publicizing them on websites, at senior centers, and in apartment complexes and churches.

The Human Touch

Some police agencies go beyond automated check-ins and use staff or volunteers to dial up seniors and talk to them one-on-one.

Every weekday morning, a staffer at the Orangeburg County Sheriff’s Office in South Carolina makes 50 to 60 calls to see if seniors in the telephone reassurance program are OK.
In Belton, Texas, 130 senior participants get an automated call every weekday except Wednesday, when they get a live call from one of dozens of volunteers, according to the police department’s Hamilton. “Sometimes that’s the only person the senior talks to that week,” she said.

A part-time coordinator oversees the volunteers and is paid for through a grant from the Area Agency on Aging of Central Texas. This year’s grant was for $21,000.

“Considering what the police have to deal with every day, this is totally the opposite end of the spectrum,” said Pam Patterson, an area agency contract manager. “It gives them an opportunity to really help seniors.”

And in Belton, as in some other parts of the country, police say the program has saved lives.

Belton police have had four “saves” so far, Hamilton said, including a man who fell to the floor in his house and stayed there from Friday, after his last check-in, until Monday, when his next call came.

In San Diego County, California, one of the bigger areas to run a call reassurance service, the sheriff’s department’s program goes far beyond automated calls. As part of You Are Not Alone, 452 senior volunteer patrol members call 334 older adults at least five times a week and visit them at least weekly, depending on their preference.

“We think the personal touch is a little bit better, in the event something else is going on,” said Sgt. Monica Sanchez. “Our senior volunteers are trained to see if there is food in the fridge or if there are signs of neglect. An automated program would not work for us. We like to observe and report.”

Sanchez said the volunteers have helped save people’s lives, such as when they visited the home of an 86-year-old woman last year, got no response, and noticed her mail had been piling up. They contacted deputies, who climbed through an open window and found the woman on the floor, severely dehydrated.

“They were just in time to save her life,” Sanchez said.