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New Lisbon Correctional Officer's sharp eyes save a life

After working a long overnight shift at the New Lisbon Correctional Institution, Correctional Officer Tina Cottingham could be forgiven if she drove right past what looked like nothing more than a pile of trash in the road.

But something about it didn't look right to Cottingham. She decided to take a closer look. What she found was a disoriented and shivering elderly woman, curled up on the road and desperately trying to cling to warmth in the darkness of a cold January morning.

Once Cottingham saw what was actually in this bundle of black and gray, she ran back to her car and positioned it in the road with its lights shining on the woman to protect her from other traffic. "She easily could have been run over," Cottingham said.

After calling 9-1-1, Cottingham began tending to the woman, who was freezing on an 18-degree morning. "I had a wool blanket that I wrapped her in. Then I let her lean against me for warmth," Cottingham said.

Cottingham said a Sheriff's deputy was soon on the scene, followed by an ambulance within about 10 minutes. But waiting for help to arrive was difficult. "It felt like forever," she said.

Like any hero, Cottingham downplays her efforts on the morning of Jan. 7. "I would hope that anybody would do what I did," she said.

But she is troubled when she remembers that at least two other vehicles rolled on by as if nothing was wrong during those first desperate moments when she was alone with the victim.

As of Jan. 23, the victim, who suffers from Alzheimer's disease, was recovering but still hospitalized. She suffered broken bones in a confused journey that apparently took her over rough terrain before she collapsed in the road about a half mile from her home.

For her efforts, Cottingham, who lives in Mauston, said she received letters of thanks from the Juneau County Sheriff and warden at New Lisbon.

The lack of more significant recognition from her employer, the state Department of Corrections, troubles Marty Beil, executive director of the Wisconsin State Employees Union, AFSCME Council 24. Cottingham is a member of WSEU Local 134.

"We are proud of Tina Cottingham. She risked her own safety to save the life of a citizen in great peril. This is a big deal. But the silence from the Madison bureaucrats is deafening," Beil said.

"This is typical of the Walker administration, which is eager to devalue and demonize public employees. But they turn a blind eye to a crystal clear example of the kind of bravery and compassion our members bring to serving the public day in and day out," he said.