

Search continues for missing girl

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ADVANCE STAFF WRITERS

Police and civilian volunteers turned up nothing new yesterday in their continuing hunt for a 12-year-old Westerleigh girl.

The child, Jennifer Schweiger, has Down's syndrome and has been missing for a week.

Yesterday's efforts included sifting through a truckload of garbage for clues and bringing in four new dogs to replace the exhausted bloodhound that has been unsuccessfully trying to pick up the girl's scent since the weekend.

Today, a Police Department scuba team from Brooklyn will search the pond at Willowbrook Park.

Police have concentrated their search efforts on the area around Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC) in Willowbrook, where the girl was seen last Thursday in the company of a man who is believed to be mildly mentally retarded. About an hour before the sighting, the girl left her Wardwell Avenue home, telling her mother she was going for a short walk.

Yesterday, four Emergency Services Unit police officers and two Sanitation Department employees sifted through the contents of several trash dumpsters collected from SIDC for any clues to Jennifer's whereabouts.

Emptied into a Sanitation Department truck and kept separate from the rest of the borough's garbage, the refuse was taken to the Fresh Kills landfill where it was carefully raked and examined for 2½ hours.

"We checked the garbage as part of a systematic search of looking into everything on the developmental center property that might be connected with the case, but could find nothing," said Sgt. John Scrivani of the Crimes Against Property Squad, which conducts all missing-persons searches on Staten Island.

New dogs — a Labrador and three German shepherds — also took up the hunt for Jennifer yesterday. The dogs and four trainers, flown in by helicopter yesterday morning to the grounds of SIDC, are being provided by the Connecticut State Police.

"New York State Police has one dog, and it is totally exhausted from the last couple of days," said Terry McGuire, chief of the New York State Police

Richmond County, who was manning headquarters at SIDC yesterday. "The New York dog did find scent by the swimming pool over the weekend, but the new dogs have not picked that up."

He added: "There hasn't been a blade of grass returned here."

Jennifer is 4 feet, 3 inches tall, about 65 pounds, and has brown hair and hazel eyes. She was wearing a pink "Sesame Street" shirt, pastel shorts and had a yellow pocketbook.

The man she was seen with is described as being about age 60, thin, 5 foot 11 inches, and with a bald spot on the back of his head.

Fliers with the girl's picture asking "Have You Seen Jennifer?" have been taped to utility poles and storefront windows all over Staten Island.

Police are organizing the search efforts out of a temporary command post in a firehouse at 875 Jewett Ave., Westerleigh. One lead called in to the headquarters yesterday that offered a glimmer of hope "placed a girl of Jennifer's description and age in a sweatshirt and shorts walking with a man in his late 50s by Willowbrook Road around 10 a.m.," said Detective Robert Tobuck.

Capt. William Wallace, commanding officer of all Staten Island detectives, said the SIDC and its environs would continue to be monitored until "every possibility" was exhausted.

"Right now, we're focusing our search on the 19 abandoned Farm Colony buildings between Forest Hill Road and Brielle Avenue. The developmental facility was our central point, and we're fanning out from there, checking adjacent areas," he added. "We've also intensified our house-to-house canvass in the Westerleigh and Willowbrook areas."

Wallace estimated that police have received a total of 125 "useful" calls from the public about the missing girl's possible whereabouts.

But Lt. Louis Fiore of the Crimes Against Property Squad noted that none of the leads so far has "come up with anything that's concrete . . . We're just eliminating all the possibilities."

Anyone wishing to volunteer to help to look for Jennifer, or who has information about where she might be, should call the police's 24-hour confidential hotline number at 447-4168.

"We can use anybody and everybody that can donate some time," said Sgt. William Bradley, working out of the Jewett Avenue post. "You can never have too many people looking for a lost child."

Volunteer search efforts are also being coordinated by Bob Cacciola, head of the Radio Emergency Associated Citizens Team (R.E.A.C.T.). He can be reached at 948-4251.

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