

Signs for safety



Tragedy inspires woman to start project to help emergency response on area lakes

BY ANDREA KELLEY
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — In July 2020, Lesia Monfre called 911 when a person went missing from a pontoon boat in the cove next to her home.

She gave dispatch her address, and rescuers came quickly, but the man drowned.

Monfre said the accident got her thinking about landmarks on the lake.

“I was here, I was able to call 911, I knew the phys-



PHOTOS BY CALEB GILBERT | THE JOURNAL

Pickens County Emergency Services is piloting a new sign system to help boaters on Lake Keowee know where they are when they call 911. The more exact location will help emergency crews get to boaters in distress faster. Twenty signs were put up around Lake Keowee with identifiers for emergency crews — a “P” standing for Pickens County, a “K” for Lake Keowee and an identifying number.



ical address right away,” she said. “What if you’re out there on the lake and you’re not near a landmark of some sort, whether it be a marina or boat launch, or bridge or something

where you could give the operator?”

“I was out on the lake with my husband, and we were riding around and

SEE SAFETY, PAGE A3

SAFETY: Project 'gives me some kind of light

FROM PAGE A1

there are all these little coves, and I'm thinking about that," she continued. "What would you do? How would you describe it? How would you say?"

Monfre approached emergency services in Oconee and Pickens counties and the S.C. Department of Natural Resources, who confirmed the lack of location indicators was "absolutely" an issue.

Some 911 callers weren't even sure which lake they were on or whether they were on the Pickens or Oconee side.

"That kind of makes things a little bit more complicated, because maybe the wrong responders are responding," Monfre said. "It was definitely a need."

The next step was getting the OK from Duke Energy, which manages Lake Keowee.

"Duke Energy has to be the one to approve anything we would do," Monfre explained. "They saw the need for the safety signs and agreed, so they put the specifications of what we could do."

HOW THE SYSTEM WORKS

Blue signs with white lettering will now be posted on docks around the lake. They'll be coded with a P or an O to signify which county they're in, a K for Lake Keowee, and a number.

Each sign will correspond to a physical address in the emergency dispatch system.

The project is being piloted in Pickens County, and those signs will be

paid for by Pickens County Emergency Services.

Oconee County Emergency Services director Scott Krein said the project will be a bigger undertaking if it expands to Oconee.

"The main difference is there's a hundred (signs) for Pickens and there's thousands for us, so it's a little bit bigger," Krein said. "We also have Lake Jocassee and many more lakes, and they're only doing one little section for them. We're trying to work through that and seeing what it looks like."

Ron McGimpsey, a volunteer firefighter with the Vineyards Fire Department in Pickens County who responded to the drowning, said the signs will help increase response time "tremendously."

"Often, boaters or peo-

ple involved in any kind of accident are not familiar with the territory ... so it slows down our response if they cannot give us a specific location," he said.

He thanked the dock owners who are allowing signs on their docks, because "without their support, we wouldn't be able to undertake this project."

Monfre said she hopes the program will expand

to other lakes if it's successful.

"It's just wonderful that the whole Lake Keowee will someday have these signs," she said. "When you think about individuals that may be out there in a stressful emergency situation ... to be able to say, 'Give me the number on that on that dock' — it's just going to make it much quicker."

She still gets emotional

in the darkness'

thinking about the day of the drowning, but said the project has been a positive outcome from a tragic situation.

"In some way, it gives me some kind of light in the darkness that this is

happening, and hopefully will be a help to people in need and for our responders," Monfre said. "This is some glimmer of good coming out of it."

akelley@upstatetoday.com | (864) 973-6681