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# The Journal



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## Hold the phone

BY SPENSER BICKETT  
Staff Writer

Koochiching County Sheriff Brian Jespersen and International Falls Fire Chief Jerry Jensen didn't just meet you, but they're still asking for your cell phone number.

The Sheriff's Office and Fire Department are sharing use of a new mass notification system, which they'll use to alert county residents of any number of emergencies. Both departments are still being trained on how to use the system, Jespersen said, but they hope to have a test message sent out in the next month or so.

The idea to have a mass notification system came during a eureka moment Jespersen had while attending the National Sheriffs Conference in Colorado last fall. The area was experiencing mass flooding, he said, and everyone in the room got a notification of the situation. They didn't have to respond, he said, but it gave him the idea to implement something similar in Koochiching County.

"I came back and I talked to Jerry about it, and the police chief, and of course Jerry was on board," Jespersen said. "I knew about it before, but it was a cost item."

The departments had looked into something similar in the past using the 911 system, Jensen said, but it was too expensive. The current system is a one-year contract with unlimited messages for \$6,500. Rainy Lake Medical Center will use the system to contact its staff, and is contributing \$1,000, with the remaining \$5,500 cost split between the city and the county.

The departments could notify people of a wide variety of emergencies using the system, Jespersen said. For example, they could let people know about a chemical spill, a train blockage on the Van Lynn Road, weather issues, evacuations, and more.

The system could also be used to notify people if an event is delayed as well.

**Emergency to A7 >**



With smiles on their faces, Tim and Kris Lessard pose for a photo on the deck of their Ranier home overlooking Rainy River. The couple say they are hopeful memories of their son, Derek, who died in August of a heroin overdose, will some day come without overwhelming sadness.

STAFF PHOTO BY EMILY GEDDE

## A FAMILY'S HEARTBREAK

BY EMILY GEDDE  
Staff Writer

**R**ANIER — It seemed like a normal Tuesday.

Kris Lessard was enjoying a morning of running errands and shopping Aug. 13, 2013, in downtown Washington D.C. before hopping on a bus back to her rental home in Alexandria, Va., seven miles outside the city.

As she got off the bus, she recalls noticing a missed call on her cell phone.

The call changed her life.

It came from her son Derek's employer, who told her not to be alarmed, but he hadn't shown up for work the last two days.

"I knew right away he was dead," Kris told The Journal last week from her home along the Rainy River.

Derek had a history of drug use and Kris and her husband, Tim, who was working in

Alaska for the summer, were aware of the 26-year-old's struggle with addiction.

Shaking with fear, Kris tested her motherly intuition and took a taxi to Derek's apartment.

"We were going over a bridge and I could see a boy running," Kris recalls, her voice in a low whisper. "He had his back to me and I was sure for a minute it was Derek. But it wasn't."

The ride to Derek's building brought a whirlwind of

fear and anxiety, Kris said. When she arrived, the building manager let her in to her son's D.C. studio apartment. At first, everything seemed normal. Derek was laying on his bed, fully clothed, his back to the door. His clothes were neatly ironed and set out for work, the apartment was clean and peaceful. A syringe sitting on a bedside table was barely noticeable.

**Addiction to A7 >**

## Nolan announces economic recovery grant

BY SPENSER BICKETT  
Staff Writer

Congressman Rick Nolan Wednesday spoke to the Koochiching Economic Development Authority, and announced the approval of a federal grant to assist the city in economic recovery.

The \$200,000 grant from the U.S. Economic Development As-

sociation is awarded to the Arrowhead Regional Development Commission, and will help with the city's economic recovery strategy following the layoff in September of 265 employees at the local paper mill.

"There's a couple hundred thousand dollars that can be used to help with the transition that's occurred as a result of the layoffs here," Nolan said, "to help diver-

sify the economy and strengthen the businesses that are here, and create good jobs and help build this economy."

Nolan, DFL-Minn., also discussed the other projects and issues he's been working on in Congress, and touched on the issues he's encountered on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. The recent budget proposed by Congressman

Paul Ryan, R-Wis., cuts transportation funding by 40 percent, he said, which isn't helpful when trying to stimulate the economy.

"There's nobody in the country that agrees with that," Nolan said. "How do guys stand there and vote for that? I'm pretty sure we're not going to let that happen."

Forestry, a vital industry in Koochiching County, is linked closely with transportation, No-

lan said. Roads used by loggers and foresters need upgrades to be able to handle the traffic and loads, he said, and they won't be improved if funding gets cut. A deteriorating infrastructure hurts not just forestry, but the whole economy, he said.

"That is the fact," Nolan said. "It's deteriorating, hurting our

**Nolan to A4 >**

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