

Rep. Lloyd Doggett
Judiciary Subcommittee Hearing of H.R. 6064
Tuesday, July 15, 2008

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Gohmert, and colleagues. I join you on behalf of H.R. 6064, the National Silver Alert Act, which I authored, and on behalf of the substitute on which I have worked with Chairman Scott and Representatives Myrick and Bilirakis. The three of us, along with many colleagues, who have cosponsored our bills, share a common concern for the challenges presented by an aging population that includes a rapidly increasing number of our neighbors, who suffer from mental impairments. The substitute for H.R. 6064 would incorporate all of Rep. Myrick's legislation and several provisions from the bill filed by Rep. Bilirakis. When it comes to the safety of missing seniors, there is no silver bullet, but a good start is a National Silver Alert.

Silver Alert is a public notification system triggered by the report of a missing senior with dementia or other mental impairment. Similar to Amber Alert for missing children, Silver Alert uses a wide array of media outlets – such as radio, television, and highway signs – to broadcast information about missing persons in order to locate and return them. In response to the unique needs presented by wandering elderly, eleven states – including Texas – have enacted programs such as Silver Alert. In fact, today marks the very first day of Kentucky's similar new effort. Another 5 states are actively considering such legislation.

While these states have shown how successful a Silver Alert system can be, Americans at risk can be found in every state and every community. The national Amber Alert law, which Congress approved in 2003 has provided national leadership to coordinate state programs, link states to resources and best practices, fund technology improvements, and encourage interstate and regional coordination. The National Silver Alert program, which I am proposing, would follow that successful model with a coordinator at the Justice Department to consult with the Federal Communication Commission, the Department of Transportation, and the Administration on Aging to prevent duplication of efforts. This would be a voluntary program that will help states initiate Silver Alert programs and sustain those already underway.

Since its inception in Texas last September, Silver Alert has been invoked 41 times. 38 of the 41 missing seniors were located safely, and 9 of those recoveries were directly attributable to Silver Alert. One of those successes involved Howard Butler, an 85-year-old man in my district. Mr. Butler left his home in Austin and drove south on Interstate 35 to the outskirts of San Antonio, then turned around and drove back north through Austin to Dallas – a distance of 325 miles. If this gentleman had been driving on I-95 here in the Northeast instead of I-35 in Texas, he would have traveled through seven states. Mr. Butler was found in the parking lot of a Dallas department store late one night. The responding officer knew that there was a Silver Alert posted for a missing person from Austin driving a dark green Buick. Thanks to Silver Alert, Austin Police were immediately notified, and he was reunited safely with his family the next morning – after being treated for slight dehydration at a local hospital.

A National Silver Alert compliments other, existing programs – like Project Lifesaver, whose leaders endorse this legislation; and the Missing Alzheimer’s Disease Patient Alert Program, which was included in the Elder Justice Act, approved by this Committee earlier this year. Silver Alert is unique in its “wide net” approach, with the ability to broadcast the alert beyond the immediate vicinity. With a range of complimentary programs, we have a better chance to find missing seniors in the crucial first 24 hours.

I want to extend special thanks to Bill Cummings and Carlos Higgins of the Texas Silver Haired Legislature, who first asked me to develop this legislation to replicate nationally the success that Texas Silver Alert has had in locating missing seniors.

My bill has been endorsed by groups including the Elder Justice Coalition, National Silver Haired Congress, Child Alert Foundation, the National Citizen’s Coalition for Nursing Home Reform, and the Assisted Living Federation of America. Working together, we can prevent the worst outcomes and keep our seniors safe.