

Rep. Bilirakis Calls for National Silver Alert Program

WASHINGTON (23 January) — On Thursday, U.S. Rep. Gus M. Bilirakis (R-Fla.), joined a bipartisan group of Representatives in reintroducing legislation that would create a national silver alert communications network and establish a national grant program to help states launch "Silver Alert" notification systems to locate missing individuals suffering from dementia-related illnesses.

The National Silver Alert Act (H.R. 632) is a bipartisan bill developed by Congressman Bilirakis, Congressman Lloyd Doggett (D-Tex.), and Congresswoman Sue Myrick (R-N.C.). The bill, which the House passed last year but stalled in the Senate, combines portions of missing persons legislation introduced by each in the last Congress. Included is language from Congressman Bilirakis' bill, the Silver Alert Grant Program Act, which would create within the Department of Justice a grant program to help states establish and operate silver alert notification systems to help find missing seniors.

"This grant program would help cash-strapped states defray the costs of establishing Silver Alert programs," said Bilirakis. "Experiences have shown that timely dissemination of information is critical to finding those who go missing."

Congressman Bilirakis drafted his silver alert legislation last year after an 86-year-old woman from Clearwater, Fla., Mary Zelter, went missing from her assisted living facility and apparently drowned after becoming confused and driving into a body of water. He encouraged state and local officials in Florida to establish such a system, which the state did in October.

Florida's statewide Silver Alert system has led to the successful location of all 37 people for whom the state has issued bulletins. More than 4.3 million Florida residents are age 60 and older, and there are about 501,000 probable Alzheimer's cases. While the vast majority of the state's seniors live independently, the Silver Alert program will help prevent tragedy among one of Florida's largest potentially vulnerable groups. According to the Alzheimer's Association, 95 percent of people with Alzheimer's disease who wander are found within a quarter-mile of their place of residence or the last location seen.

"I am pleased that Florida's state and local officials have moved forward with their own efforts in the absence of federal legislation. Some states already have these systems, and though federal legislation is not a necessary precursor to implementation, it would provide much needed funding and coordination," said Bilirakis. "I believe that all states should establish similar systems to help find those suffering from dementia-related illnesses and prevent tragedies like the one that occurred in my community."

According to the National Institute on Aging at the National Institutes of Health, as many as 5,000,000 people in the United States may suffer from Alzheimer's disease. The Alzheimer's Association estimates that more than 60 percent of people suffering from Alzheimer's disease will wander away from their homes or care-giving facilities during their lifetimes.