

St. Petersburg Times | Florida's Silver Alert spurs a national plan

By Mimi Andelman, St. Petersburg Times

One year after the death of the 86-year-old Pinellas County woman who inspired the creation of Florida's Silver Alert, the notification system for missing seniors, a national Silver Alert bill awaits approval in the U.S. Senate.

Sponsored by U.S. Rep. Gus Bilirakis, R-Tarpon Springs, the federal legislation is designed to set up a grant program to help states develop their own notification system for missing seniors. (It works like the Amber Alert does for missing children.) The bill passed in the House late last year but failed to make it through the Senate because of the break. Recently reintroduced, the bill passed unanimously in the House on Feb. 10.

But Florida had no Silver Alert program when, you may recall, Mary Zelter, 86, of Largo drove away on Feb. 26, 2008, from her assisted living facility in her white Chrysler Sebring convertible and never returned.

Her body was found a week later 10 miles away in the Intracoastal Waterway near a Clearwater boat ramp. Her submerged car was nearby.

The Silver Alert has grass roots grown locally. Within about two months after Zelter's death, folks couldn't forget her. Bilirakis, for one. And folks who came together to build what they hoped would be a pilot program based in Pinellas County. Among the committee members was Largo police Chief Lester Aradi, the chairman; Sallie Parks of the Area Agency on Aging; Pinellas Sheriff Jim Coats; and Zelter's daughter, Mary Lallucci. There was input from the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, as well as others.

Program details were hammered over the summer and presented to the FDLE. Before too long, it drew the attention of Gov. Crist's office. Instead of a being a pilot program in Pinellas County it would become statewide. Florida's Silver Alert became law, signed by executive order in October.

Lallucci, Zelter's daughter, recalled the effort and the spotlight on her late mother. "Our family would never have imagined that her death would be instrumental in how the Silver Alert came to the state," she said, and perhaps eventually to the nation.

"It moved people to action," Lallucci said. "People really related to her, and our family: 'Gosh it could be anybody.' "

Bilirakis' office now counts 13 states that have a Silver Alert or similar program, and 13 more considering it.

Since the program began in October, there have been 48 Silver Alerts issued in Florida, including three in February. Forty-three of the alerts ended happily for families, including the most recent three; the remaining five, however, were found deceased, the FDLE reported.

One year later, Lallucci can only speculate as to what went wrong. But she has a theory. Her parents once lived in a waterfront condo, where they loved the view of the gulf. And a few days before her mother disappeared, a group from her living facility made a bus trip along the coast. It might have been that pull, and a sense of adventure, that took her mother away.

"Her tragedy has become such a catalyst for good things," Lallucci said, "and that has helped us a lot in terms of coming to terms with such a tragic ending with such an important person in your life.

"Every time a Silver Alert comes out, I'm so grateful those families didn't have the tragedy we have. It's a real blessing."