

St. Petersburg Times Editorial | Thank Pinellas residents who helped create Silver Alert

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Praise is due for work to create Silver Alert
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Several Pinellas residents deserve praise for working hard to create Florida's successful Silver Alert program, which uses the Amber Alert model for lost children to help locate lost senior citizens and handicapped adults.

For their efforts on behalf of lost adults, Largo police Chief Lester Aradi and Belleair resident Mary Lallucci were honored recently with the Making a Difference Award by the Area Agency on Aging.

The death of Lallucci's 86-year-old mother, Mary Zelter, sparked her passion for creating a Silver Alert program. Zelter disappeared from her assisted living facility in February 2008. Her submerged car was found in the Intracoastal Waterway at the end of a Clearwater Beach boat ramp. Her body was floating nearby. She apparently had driven her car into the water and drowned.

Florida did not have the Silver Alert then, but Lallucci learned that a few other states did, so she began talking about the need for one here. As interest in the idea grew, Aradi volunteered to head up the effort to create a pilot Silver Alert program in Pinellas County.

A few months later, after an 81-year-old Largo man with Alzheimer's drove away from his home and was found on Alligator Alley, a bill was introduced in the state Legislature to make the program statewide. Gov. Charlie Crist streamlined the process by signing an executive order last October that created Florida's statewide Silver Alert.

When a Silver Alert is issued by law enforcement, electronic road signs flash a description of the vehicle the missing person is believed to be driving. The Silver Alert is primarily used to locate senior citizens who are impaired by Alzheimer's disease or dementia, but it also may be used for younger adults with cognitive problems who are missing.

Motorists are becoming accustomed to seeing the Silver Alert signs on highways around the state. Of the 54 Silver Alerts that have been issued, all but five of the individuals were found and returned safely to their loved ones. Five were found dead.

Another person who has been passionate about the Silver Alert is U.S. Rep. Gus Bilirakis, R-Palm Harbor. Bilirakis introduced a bill in the U.S. House to award funding for the establishment of a nationwide Silver Alert program. Components of his bill were combined with parts of other bills on similar topics in the House, and the resulting legislation, the National Silver Alert Act, was passed by the House in February.

It now awaits Senate approval. U.S. Sen. Mel Martinez, R-Fla., introduced Senate Bill 557 this month and it was referred to the Judiciary Committee. Since most bills never make it out of committee, advocates of a nationwide program should contact Martinez and other senators and urge them to give attention to the bill. The Silver Alert program is a proven life saver.