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State Needs Silver Alert, The Amber Alert For Alzheimer Patients

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Florida has a higher number of residents older than 65 than any other state in the nation. The Alzheimer's Foundation of America said more than 300,000 of those residents have Alzheimer's disease, and about six in 10 will wander away and become disoriented.

The association said of those who wander, most are found within five miles of their home. Of those not found within 24 hours, half will be seriously injured or die.

An 81-year-old Largo man was one of the lucky ones. He was found about a week ago more than 150 miles away from his home. Florida Highway Patrol troopers located him in his van on Alligator Alley near Fort Myers.

WORKING IN EIGHT STATES

The incident was the impetus for state Reps. Tom Anderson, R-Dunedin, and Kurt Kelly, R-Ocala, to announce they will file a bill for the next session of the Florida Legislature that would set up a Silver Alert program. It's an Amber Alert for seniors - only instead of using media alerts and road signs with changing type to notify a community of a child who has been kidnapped, the information would be about missing persons.

It's working in eight states, and has resulted in the safe return of a majority of those reported. When 83-year-old Helen Long left her North Carolina home without notice last January, her daughter called state police, who sent out a description of her truck on the state's Silver Alert system. Six hours later, a UPS driver spotted the truck and called for help. Long was returned to her home unharmed.

"The beauty of Silver Alert is that it's something people can remember," Carlos Higgins of the National Silver-Haired Congress, told Stateline.org. "If you just say 'Silver Alert,' people know there's a confused elderly person out there who needs help."

STARTED IN 2006

Colorado was the first state with the program in 2006. Others quickly followed. In April, U.S. Rep. Gus Bilirakis, R-Palm Harbor, introduced a bill to create a \$5.6 million federal grant program to help states establish a Silver Alert system.

Bilirakis filed the bill after Mary Zelter, 86, signed herself out of an assisted-living facility in Largo in late February and went off to the store in her white Sebring convertible. She didn't return. Seven days later, her body and the car were found in the Intracoastal Waterway off Clearwater Beach, about eight miles from her home. Zelter apparently mistook a boat ramp for the continuation of a road and drove her car into the water.

"This tragedy unfortunately highlights the very real problem of older residents, many of whom suffer from diseases which leave them easily confused and disoriented, wandering away from their homes or caregiving facilities and meeting harm because family, friends and authorities could not find them in time," Bilirakis said.

Silver Alert costs little and could piggyback on the Amber Alert system. The Legislature should take quick action to get it up and running.

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