

Rep. Bilirakis Introduces Bill Creating Silver Alert Grant Program

WASHINGTON (Apr. 24) — On Thursday, U.S. Rep. Gus M. Bilirakis (R-Fla.), introduced legislation that would establish a national grant program to help U.S. states and territories establish "Silver Alert" notification systems to locate missing individuals suffering from dementia-related illnesses.

The Silver Alert Grant Program Act of 2008 would establish a grant program within the Department of Justice to allow states with an approved application to obtain federal funding for the establishment of Silver Alert programs or to make improvements to existing ones. Additionally, the legislation would require the U.S. Attorney General to report to Congress on the experiences of states with existing Silver Alert systems to help guide their establishment in other states.

"Florida and other states should establish alert systems similar to the highly-successful Amber Alert program to help find seniors and prevent tragedies like the one that occurred in our community. This grant program would help cash-strapped states like Florida defray the costs of establishing such programs," said Rep. Bilirakis. "Experiences have shown that timely dissemination of information is critical to finding those who go missing."

Congressman Bilirakis drafted the legislation 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 drove into a body of 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 care-giving facilities and meeting harm because family, friends, and authorities could not find them in time," said Rep. Bilirakis. "This is a problem state and federal policy-makers should address before something like this happens again."

Zelter's daughter, Mary Lallucci of Belleair, Fla., called for the creation of Silver Alert systems following her mother's death.

"As our family grieves over this heartbreaking news of the loss our mother, Mary Zelter, and remembers her life and generous spirit; we are committed to implementing the Silver Alert in Florida and all states for that matter," said Lallucci. "We appreciate Congressman Bilirakis responding to this need and we look forward to working together with him so that no other family has to endure the heartache we have suffered."

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.