

Silver Alert provides valuable tool at critical times

By Mimi Andelman, St. Petersburg Times

We won't soon be seeing Grandpa's face or Great-Aunt Shirley's height and weight on a milk carton, but we now have something that's sadly familiar for folks of missing kids: the "Silver Alert." It's the elder version of the "Amber Alert" that is quickly dispatched by law enforcement agencies when a child goes missing.

The new program relays information about a loved one's physical description, make and model of car, and last known location. Highway bulletins light up, and radio and TV stations get the word out.

It was as a result of one disappearance this year that prompted the Silver Alert program's creation. In June, an 81-year-old Largo man was found 150 miles away, in the eastbound lane of Alligator Alley near Naples. As a result, state Reps. Tom Anderson, R-Dunedin, and Kurt Kelly, R-Ocala, introduced legislation that Gov. Charlie Crist signed on Oct. 8.

It is estimated that 95 percent of people who go missing are found within a quarter mile from their home or last location seen, according to the Alzheimer's Association. But this isn't a finder's service for those times when your husband has given you the slip and is down the street playing euchre with some cohorts.

It's a life-saver for folks 60 or older who are incapacitated by Alzheimer's or other dementia. Rarely it may be used for persons 18 to 59 if it is clear that the person has an "irreversible deterioration of intellectual faculties," according to program guidelines.

People should contact their local law enforcement agency when a qualified family member goes missing. If the criteria are met, they'll issue a Silver Alert, in turn notifying the Florida Department of Law Enforcement if the person is driving a vehicle. If you're aware of a Silver Alert and see someone on the road fitting the description, or the vehicle, call 911 or *FHP (347). Be prepared to note the person's whereabouts and, if possible, the vehicle tag, location and direction of travel.

The Silver Alert program is proving popular, which is one of those bad news, good news moments. In the two and a half months that it has been in effect, approximately 20 Silver Alerts have been issued, compared with only about a dozen Amber Alerts for all of 2008, according to the Florida Highway Patrol.

Fewer than a dozen states have a Silver Alert program, including North Carolina, Texas, Michigan and Colorado, but one Florida legislator hopes to take the system nationwide. U.S. Rep. Gus Bilirakis, R-Palm Harbor, sponsored a bill, H.R. 5898, which passed the House in September. It would allocate \$5-million in grant money in the next five years to set up the system nationwide. It's now in the Senate.

Bilirakis filed the bill in March, within weeks after an 86-year-old Largo woman drove away from her assisted living home in Largo. Her car was discovered after a week about 10 miles away in the water near Clearwater Beach. She had drowned.

And then two weeks ago:

Police have issued a statewide Silver Alert for an 83-year-old woman with early stages of Alzheimer's who left her Briny Breezes home Dec. 10 to buy a sandwich and failed to return. She is 5 feet 4, 130 pounds, has gray hair and blue eyes. She was wearing a pink sweater and jeans.

A day later, police in Boynton Beach near Briny Breezes received word that law enforcement officers in Broward County had located her at a gas station in the Fort Lauderdale area 30 miles south. Alive and well.