



for those who WANDER

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Almost everyone has heard of Amber Alert, the child abduction alert bulletin used throughout the United States and other countries. Adopted by Michigan in 2001, this system only serves children who are 17 years old or younger. Yet, there has been a deadly concern from families who have wandering elders with mental impairments. With recent legislation passed in Michigan that established the Silver Alert Act, these families now have the help they need.

Dione Pierce was living a real-life nightmare in 2005. Her grandmother, Estelle Mozelle Pierce, had wandered away from her son's house and was nowhere to be found. An entrepreneur and pillar of her community, Estelle was suffering from Alzheimer's disease. The family was in a panic. Worried about Estelle's safety and knowing that she would need her diabetes medication, they frantically searched the neighborhood she had lived her entire life in. Coming up empty handed, they then turned to the police and media for assistance.

To their horror they were turned away from the police department and asked to come back in 24 hours to file a missing person's report. It didn't make sense to them. They soon learned that even though Estelle was medically unable to return home or make the appropriate choices to keep her safe, she was an adult and therefore had privacy protections under the law.

Enduring the cruel twist of irony, the family turned to the media. The media didn't offer any assistance either because of the liability concerns about broadcasting a missing person's report that contains medical information. Ms. Pierce was told to let them know if the worst-case scenario happened and they would report on that.

The family did what they could on their own to search for their

grandmother and the dreaded call came four days later. Estelle was found dead in a rail yard not too far from her home. "I felt an urgency to make sure no family would feel rejected and helpless when trying to assist a loved one that can't help them self anymore," Ms. Pierce said.

And so began a quest to make sure that never again would a family be left without resources in these dire circumstances. Estelle's family partnered with the Alzheimer's Association Michigan Chapters to fight for a Silver Alert law.

On June 19, 2012, the Silver Alert Act, officially named the "Mozelle Senior or Vulnerable Adult Medical Alert Act", was signed into law. The law provides a plan for immediate action to be taken by local law enforcement instead of the standard 24 hour wait time for a person 60 years of age or older that suffers from dementia or is otherwise mentally impaired. It also includes provisions to limit liability for local news media when publishing a missing person's medical information.

How Does Silver Alert Work?

Fortunately, it works much like Amber Alert. In fact, it uses much of the same resources and tools. A law enforcement agency that receives notice of a missing senior or vulnerable adult from a "911" call would be required to investigate and prepare a missing person's report immediately.

The law enforcement agency would forward it as soon as practicable to all enforcement agencies with jurisdiction in the location where the missing person resides and was last seen as well as one or more appropriate broadcasters.

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Who Is At Risk Of Wandering?

According to the Alzheimer's Association, anyone who has memory problems and is able to walk is at risk for wandering. Even in the early stages of dementia, a person can become disoriented or confused for a period of time. It's important to plan ahead for this type of situation. Be on the lookout for the following warning signs:

- ▶ Returns from a regular walk or drive later than usual.
- ▶ Tries to fulfill former obligations, such as going to work.
- ▶ Tries or wants to "go home," even when at home.
- ▶ Is restless, paces or makes repetitive movements.
- ▶ Has difficulty locating familiar places like the bathroom, bedroom or dining room.
- ▶ Asks the whereabouts of current or past friends and family.
- ▶ Acts as if doing a hobby or chore, but nothing gets done.
- ▶ Appears lost in a new or changed environment.

When The Worst Happens

Ninety-four percent of people who wander are found within 1.5 miles of where they disappeared and close to half of those who are not found within 24 hours will become seriously injured or will die, so time is of the essence. Also until the Silver Alert is issued, initially the public may not be as much help as they would be in a wandering child situation. The fundamental difference between relying on the public to recognize a child that is alone versus recognizing a person with dementia, who can look perfectly normal and healthy or gain access to a vehicle while wandering, is challenging to say the least.

This challenge can be reduced significantly with preparation. The Alzheimer's Association suggests the following plan when the worst happens:

- ▶ Keep a list of people to call on for help. Have telephone numbers easily accessible.
- ▶ Ask neighbors, friends and family to call if they see the person alone.
- ▶ Keep a recent, close-up photo and updated medical information on hand to give to police.
- ▶ Know your neighborhood. Pinpoint dangerous areas near the home, such as bodies of water, open stairwells, dense foliage, tunnels, bus stops and roads with heavy traffic.
- ▶ Is the individual right or left-handed? Wandering generally

follows the direction of the dominant hand.

- ▶ Keep a list of places where the person may wander. This could include past jobs, former homes, places of worship or a restaurant.
- ▶ If the person does wander, search the immediate area for no more than 15 minutes. Call "911" and report to the police that a "vulnerable adult" is missing. A missing person's report should be filed, and the police will begin to search for the individual.

Additional Resources

The Alzheimer's Association offers and supports two types of programs to help with those who wander. The first one is called MedicAlert® + Alzheimer's Association Safe Return® program. It is a nationwide registry and proactive search-and-locator service. If an individual with Alzheimer's or a related dementia wanders and becomes lost, caregivers can call the 24-hour emergency response line (1-800-625-3780) to report it. The initial costs range from \$55 to \$97 and has a \$35 annual renewal fee.

The second program offered is called Comfort Zone®. It includes everything in the MedicAlert + Safe Return program plus location tracking technology to help manage the location of your loved one. Costs start at \$42.99 per month plus an activation fee of \$45.00.

Final Thoughts

Michigan joins 29 other states that have a similar version of Silver Alert with Colorado being the first state to adopt a Silver Alert system in 2006. Among states that do release statistics, retrieval rates are very high. In Georgia, of the 71 calls received over a three-year period, 70 were returned home safely



Currently, there is pending federal legislation to unify all state programs under a common National Silver Alert Act. Critics, including Governor George Pataki who vetoed New York state legislation to implement a Silver Alert system, have raised concerns that the addition of Silver Alerts to the Amber Alert system will weaken the overall effectiveness by having too many alerts.

Clearly the Silver Alert system works and, in fact, was instrumental in the safe recovery of a Saginaw County man last month that went missing and was found alive in a cornfield less than 24 hours later. This legislation, coupled with the Alzheimer's Association's programs, helps bring Dione Pierce's hope to "make sure no family would feel rejected and helpless" a reality to us all.

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