

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE

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SENATOR JOHNNY ELLIS MINORITY LEADER

SENATE BILL 36

“An act providing for the safety of missing vulnerable adults”

The Alaska Commission on Aging estimates more than 7,785 Alaskans suffer from Alzheimer’s disease and related dementia. This accounts for 11 percent of Alaskans over the age of 65 and nearly half of Alaskans over the age of 85. Despite the great risk Alaska’s harsh weather and vast wilderness pose to adults with dementia and other impairments that go missing, the state does not have a formal program for immediately notifying the public when an impaired adult is unaccounted for.

Bonnie Scott, a 63-year old Fairbanks resident suffering from Alzheimer’s disease, froze to death in 2011 when she became disoriented while driving, left her car, and could not be located before she died of exposure. Repeated tragedies of this nature coupled with the state’s growing senior population point to the urgent need for a notification and response system for missing vulnerable adults in Alaska.

Senate Bill 36 would call on the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs to coordinate with the Department of Public Safety to design and implement an “Amber Alert” type notification system to help locate missing senior citizens and adults with disabilities. This “Silver Alert” system created by Senate Bill 36 would use media outlets and existing emergency notification infrastructure in Alaska and will not present any significant cost to the state.

This bill is a priority of advocates for senior citizens and adults with disabilities for its potential to make searches for missing vulnerable adults more comprehensive and successful. By applying the power of public awareness, Senate Bill 36 could save local public safety departments valuable time and resources with shorter, more successful missing person searches that harness the Alaskan tradition of helping friends and neighbors in need.

Thirty-eight other states have either a “Silver Alert” program or an even more comprehensive emergency alert system for missing persons. In 2010, Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour signed a bill establishing a new Silver Alert system, with his office saying, “Any Mississippian with an elderly relative or family member with a cognitive disorder can appreciate [this legislation].”

As it has done with the “Amber Alert” system, the U.S. Congress is considering instituting a nationwide requirement for states to have “Silver Alert” programs. Senate Bill 36 presents an excellent chance for Alaska to design and implement an effective Silver Alert system suited to the state’s unique geography and local communities before federal requirements potentially dictate its features.

I respectfully urge your consideration and support of Senate Bill 36.