

Silver Alert Legislation

Silver Alert LAW WILL HELP RESCUE LOST SENIORS

BY | Rhonda Landry



STATE REPRESENTATIVE SCOTT SIMON AND SUSAN LEBLANC.

It was February 2, 2003 when Paul A. LeBlanc, age 69, went for a bike ride in Flowers Estates, a heavily wooded Covington neighborhood, and never returned. LeBlanc, a native of Madisonville, was a youthful senior, physically fit and newly retired, but was suffering from Parkinson's disease and early dementia. Most importantly, he was someone's father.

Minutes matter when someone with dementia is lost. When LeBlanc's daughter

Susan LeBlanc, alerted local police it took almost two days before media outlets aired coverage of his disappearance.

According to the Alzheimer's Association, at least 5.2 million Americans suffer from dementia, and research shows that six out of 10 with dementia will wander. Only four percent of those who leave home are able to find their way back without help and if a person is not found within 24 hours, half will suf-

fer serious injury or death. Paul LeBlanc is now one of those statistics.

Despite efforts by law enforcement and LeBlanc's family, Paul LeBlanc was never found. It is a tragedy that has both haunted his daughter Susan and spurred her to action in a new career creating medical awareness.

Currently 24 states have a Silver Alert or similar program targeting missing seniors. Like the Amber Alert system used to locate missing children, the Silver Alert is meant to accelerate the usual missing persons search by immediately notifying law enforcement, media outlets, and other agencies and making use of state transportation department road signs and reverse 911 calls, to involve the immediate community in rescuing these vulnerable seniors.

Does Louisiana have a Silver Alert? The answer is yes and no.

In July 2008, the passage of House Bill 1378 by Representative Scott Simon of Abita Springs (Act 662) and Senate Bill 423 by Senator Don Cravins, Jr. and others (Act 453) created the "Silver Alert" program or "Silver Alert Network" within the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections.

"The intent was for this to be a statewide alert program that would mimic the Amber Alert," said Representative Simon.

In February 2009, the Silver Alert Steering Committee, comprised of representatives from numerous law enforcement and other government agencies, broadcast and cable associations, and the Louisiana Alzheimer's Association, unanimously concluded that "there is little need for a statewide activation of a Silver Alert system", and that cases of missing persons are best handled at the local level. The committee also concluded that a training and educational component would be instrumental in the success of a Silver Alert network in Louisiana.

"We've made a good first step in bringing awareness to the issue, but there's much more that needs to be done, especially given the fact that this will happen more often as our demographics continue to grow older," said Simon.

"One of the sticking points in this program is implementation and training," said Ralph O'Neal of the St. Tammany

SALT Council (Seniors and Law Enforcement Together), who went on to say he thinks there is a misunderstanding of the depth of the problem and the necessity for the program at the state level.


Despite these recommendations more than a year ago, the Department of Public Safety still has not developed and implemented a Silver Alert system within Louisiana as they were charged with doing. It seems there was some confusion as to who was actually responsible. "Now that the responsibility has been clarified, something can be done," said Major Charlie Dupuy, Governmental Liaison with the Louisiana State Police.

States that have implemented a Silver Alert on the back of their Amber Alert programs have been successful, and with very little additional cost. North Carolina is operating its program with no new money. In 2008, 128 Silver Alerts were issued, and of these, 118 seniors were safely recovered. Texas appropriated a small increase in public safety funding to cover administrative costs. Its system was activated 52 times in the first year with 48 missing seniors safely located.

"Whatever costs there are, are minimal," said O'Neal, who noted that his agency and others have the expertise and the facilities to assist in developing and implementing training for law enforcement personnel.

"Even one life saved is worth it," said TFC Mark Dennis of the Louisiana State Police, Troop F Public Affairs and newly appointed coordinator of the Silver Alert Network within Louisiana.

Thanks to the efforts of Representative Simon and many others, the level of awareness has been raised concerning this issue. "We have good intentions. Everyone wants to do what's right, but how to get it all done is the key," said Simon. "People need to get behind this law. Somewhere, somehow we have to do better," said O'Neal.

To express your support for implementation of the Silver Alert in Louisiana, contact the Department of Public Safety/Louisiana State Police at www.lsp.org or your legislators at www.legis.state.la.us. Susan LeBlanc is available for speaking engagements on creating medical awareness and can be reached at smlebc@yahoo.com. 

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