

Thank you so much for this opportunity to speak with you about wandering. My name is Meg Polyte and I am the Policy Director for the Vermont Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association. I'm here to testify on H.530 the Silver Alert Bill. The Alzheimer's Association supports a comprehensive approach to constructing a Silver Alert system that addresses the needs of persons living with dementia and their families and effectively disseminates relevant information about missing individuals with Alzheimer's disease or other dementias to the appropriate local law enforcement and community support networks.

I'm not going to present a lot of details on the prevalence of Alzheimer's and dementia, as I shared those with your committee last week. As a brief reminder, right now there are more than 13,000 Vermonters over the age of 65 living with Alzheimer's. That number is projected to climb to 17,000 by 2025. One in three seniors dies with Alzheimer's or another dementia.

The number one predictor for Alzheimer's is age. Vermont is the 3rd oldest state by median age and the percent of older Vermonters is rapidly rising. It is estimated 1 in 3 Vermonters will be over 60 by 2030.

I have met with Deb Casavant and Denise Morse whose father went missing in 2020. H.530 proposes the Act be known as "Clint's Law" in his memory. I'd like to read from an email Deb sent to her Representative on February 2, 2022 where she shares her experience.

Dear Rep. Vhovsky,

I'm writing to you as an Essex constituent who is advocating for H.530 the Silver Alert Bill that is waiting for action in your committee.

My father, Clint Casavant went missing on December 6, 2020 and according to the coroner's report, he died of hypothermia that same night. His body wasn't found until days later. We reported him missing to the authorities on December 6th but nothing went out to other agencies or the media. This put the burden on my family to come up with a way to communicate out to as many people as we could as fast as we could. The fact that the authorities didn't send anything out that night was frustrating and didn't make sense to me as all they had to do was send out a communication to the other agencies. This bill will put a structure around who does what, the communication timelines and what happens when an adult goes missing.

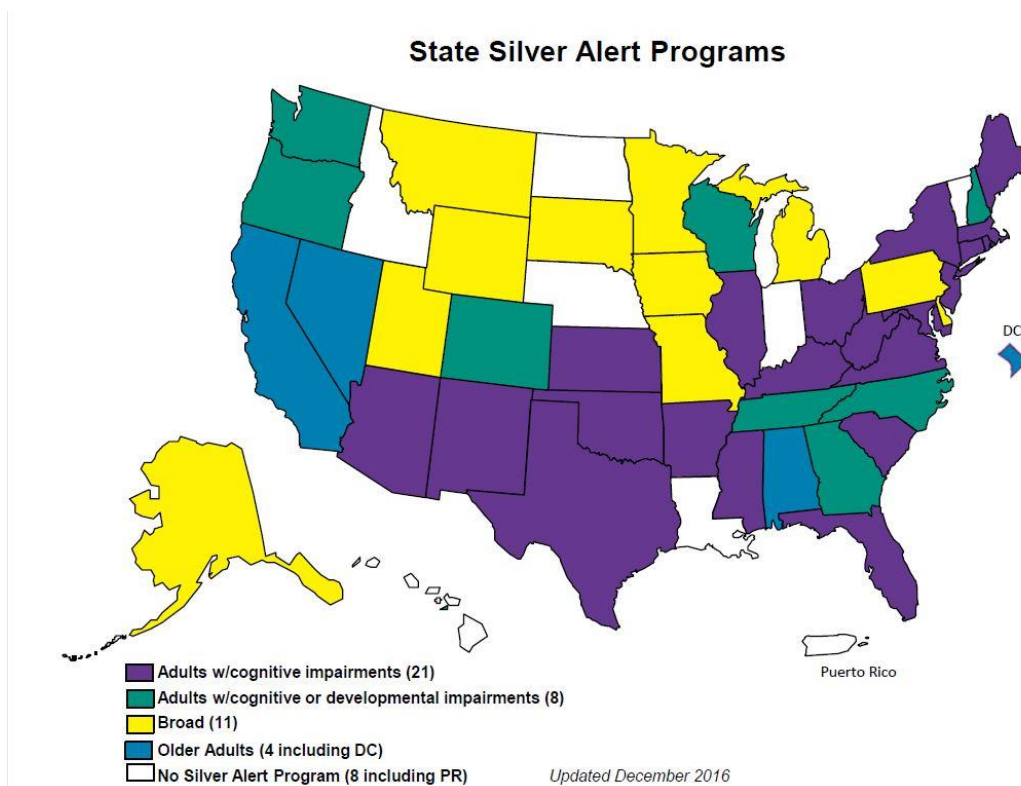
Passing this bill would bring Vermont in line with more than 40 other states and help ensure other families do not have the fragmented and unsuccessful search experience that we did.

In speaking with Deb and her sister Denise I learned of the many things they did to try and find their father including posting on Facebook, making copies of posters and hanging them around town, organizing a local search of family and friends, and more. When a parent or loved one goes missing the family should be able to dedicate all their resources to finding the person, not trying to figure out how to organize a community search, designing posters, or replying to the overwhelming support they received on social media.

As the threat of Alzheimer’s disease continues to touch more people’s lives, the safety of those individuals will continue to be a tremendous concern. Alzheimer’s disease causes people to lose their ability to recognize familiar places and faces. It’s common for a person living with dementia to wander or become lost or confused about their location, and it can happen at any stage of the disease. Six in 10 people living with dementia will wander at least once; many do so repeatedly. Although common, wandering can be dangerous — even life-threatening — and the stress of this risk weighs heavily on caregivers and family.

One study found that among those with dementia who wander, almost half who are not found within 24 hours suffer serious injury or death.

Most adult wanderers are found within 1.5 miles of home, so being able to rapidly deploy local search operations is important.



Included in my testimony you will find a map of the United States showing the different Silver Alert programs that were established as of December 2016. The states with programs can be broadly categorized according to the following criteria:

- 21 states have programs that specify adults with cognitive impairments.
- 8 states have programs that specify adults with cognitive or developmental impairments.
- 4 states plus Washington, DC have programs that relate to older adults.
- 11 states have programs that are wide-ranging in scope.

People with cognitive impairments have many unique needs. It is imperative those interacting with Vermonters with Alzheimer's Disease or other dementias receive training to recognize those needs and they are informed of effective ways to communicate and interact with people with dementia.

For example, a person with dementia may not remember their name or address. They may be able to answer a lot of other questions and these answers may still evade them.

A person with dementia can become disoriented, even in familiar places.

A person with dementia may have lost track of time and they may be looking for a location, person, or path they traveled in the past.

A person with dementia may exhibit aggression, a symptom of frustration and/or fear, that can often be misunderstood. Aggression can be caused by many factors including physical discomfort, environmental factors and poor communication.

As you consider the Silver Alert legislation I ask you to consider the following provisions as they relate to Vermonters with dementia.

- Be specifically tailored to individuals with Alzheimer's disease or other dementias regardless of age to ensure those with younger-onset are included. This is another reason training for signs is important as we do not expect to see Alzheimer's presenting itself in people in their 50ies.
- Not require official proof of diagnosis; instead require a caregiver statement that the person has Alzheimer's, mild cognitive impairment, or a related dementia. Only about 50% of those with Alzheimer's have an official diagnosis.
- Use a tiered approach to alert issuance. Most adult wanderers are found within 1.5 miles of home; therefore, issuing an alert should not automatically trigger use of statewide highway signs or other statewide searching. Instead the

program should emphasize local searching first, only escalating to a regional or statewide basis if evidence suggests a person has left the immediate area (i.e., in a car or by public transportation).

- Allow local searching to begin immediately upon receiving a report of the disappearance. A person with dementia can end up in danger if they are left to wander for an extended period of time.
- Mandate and appropriate funding for first responder training. The techniques for searching for a missing person with dementia are very different than those employed for searching for other individuals. Police officers are a key group to have trained; others include 911 operators and emergency personnel. This is a key provision that states often overlook, mainly because of the costs associated with training. In addition to different techniques for searching for the individual, training can be valuable to understand how to effectively communicate with someone with dementia.
- Collect data on Silver Alert usage and regularly evaluate program operation.

The most effective system will include collaboration and cooperation among families, all levels of government, and organizations that support local communities, such as the Alzheimer's Association.

Thank you for the opportunity to share information about wandering among those with dementia with your committee and I look forward to working with you on this legislation.