

State launches plan to create emergency-alert program

By TIERRA PALMER • The Eagle-Gazette Staff • June 30, 2008

LANCASTER - Patty Ciripompa knows all too well how anxious friends and relatives of older adults can be when their loved ones go missing. Ciripompa is the director of Adult Protective Services for Fairfield County Job & Family Services.

Local law enforcement officials contacted the agency earlier this year after finding an elderly man who couldn't remember where he lived.

"He was very healthy, but he suffered from some form of dementia and became disoriented. He stopped and asked a police officer for help, and the officer contacted us," Ciripompa said.

The man was reunited with his family almost immediately, but other families aren't so lucky. However, Ciripompa thinks a new system recently implemented by the state likely will mean older adults who go missing can be found a lot sooner, which will be a relief to them and their families.

The Missing Adults Alert system - passed unanimously by the House and Senate - is designed to notify law enforcement agencies, media and the public whenever an individual age 65 or older or an adult who has a mental impairment such as dementia or Alzheimer's disease is missing and believed to be in danger.

The system is modeled after the Amber Alert system, an emergency-alert system used in the identification and location of abducted children.

It's an important service," Ciripompa said in reference to the Missing Adults Alert system, which launched statewide June 20.

"We have had (several) referrals where police, sheriff's deputies or the highway patrol have found an older adult who is lost (and) uncertain about where they live or how they got lost. The adults who get lost are very vulnerable, and their families are frantic (to find them)," she said.

In another instance, a Fairfield County woman in her early 80s was found safe in a neighboring county nearly one day after her family reported her missing.

Ciripompa said the woman likely would have been found a lot sooner if the Missing Adults Alert system or similar programs to locate missing older adults such as Project Lifesaver had been widely available.

Project Lifesaver is a system designed to track people with Alzheimer's disease and related disorders such as autism who might be prone to wander away.

The Missing Adult Alert system provides "a framework to search for missing adults," said state Sen. John Carey, R-Wellston, who sponsored the legislation that led to the creation of the Missing Adults Alert system.

That legislation - Senate Bill 87 - passed unanimously in both the Senate and the House. Gov. Ted Strickland signed the bill into law March 21.

"Some law enforcement agencies have the policy that an adult has to be missing for 24 hours (before a report can be filed), but if they are an Alzheimer's patient, 24 hours may be too late," said Carey, who twice was recognized as the Legislator of the Year by the Ohio Association of Area Agencies on Aging.

The state is among the first in the nation to adopt such legislation. Georgia, Colorado and Texas have similar alert systems.

When enacted, the Missing Adults Alert system sends radio and computer messages to all law enforcement agencies in the state. E-mails and faxes about the missing person also are sent to media outlets, and that information is posted on electronic billboards, Ohio Department of Transportation signboards and Ohio Lottery terminals.

"We couldn't be more grateful for Sen. Carey and the governor supporting (this idea)," said Cindy Farson, executive director of the Central Ohio Area Agency on Aging.

Fairfield County Sheriff Dave Phalen said the Missing Adults Alert system will be a valuable tool in locating vulnerable adults.

An estimated 4.5 million Americans have Alzheimer's disease, according to the Alzheimer's Association. That number is expected to increase to 11.3 million to 16 million Americans by 2050.