

## Policy brief

# Community alert systems for missing vulnerable adults: A call to action for policy makers

### Objectives of this brief

This policy brief informs the development of community alert systems for vulnerable adults at risk of going missing in Canada.

It aims to:

Present an overview of the issue of missing vulnerable adults in Canada and the role of community alert systems in finding missing vulnerable adults.

Synthesize the perspectives of national and international expertise, including people living with dementia, on factors and challenges that need to be considered in the development of community alert systems.

Discuss alert systems such as Silver Alert and Purple Alert used in the United States and Scotland, respectively, and the feasibility of implementing community alert systems in Canada.

Offer contextualized potential solutions to inform decision-making and the roles of policy makers in developing community alert systems in Canada.

### Background

In 2016, the proportion of older adults was projected to outnumber the proportion of children by 2017.<sup>1</sup> As of 2020, people aged 65 and older were over 6.8 million or made up 18% of the adult population.<sup>2</sup> Further, the proportion of older adults is expected to increase to 25% by 2036.<sup>1</sup> Vulnerable adults such as people living with dementia, cognitive impairment, brain injury and other cognitive conditions have a higher chance of getting lost and going missing.

About six in ten people with dementia will wander.<sup>3</sup> The number of people who have gone missing due to dementia-related wandering has significantly increased in recent years.<sup>4</sup> If not found within 24 hours, up to half of missing persons living with dementia will be found seriously injured or deceased.<sup>5, 6</sup>

In Canada, when a vulnerable older adult is missing, the responsibility of locating the person is placed on first responders.<sup>7</sup> However, these services are limited and costly.<sup>8, 9</sup> Specifically, in parts of rural Canada, to locate a missing person could require searching miles of natural landscape, sometimes in inclement weather.<sup>9, 10</sup>



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The COVID-19 pandemic has added risks and challenges for persons living with dementia and cognitive impairment, and their caregivers, resulting in an increase in resource use, such as those offered by the Alzheimer societies, other community organizations, and first responders.<sup>11, 12</sup>

“Silver Alert”, publicly funded in most states in the United States, refers to the use of media outlets by police services to publicly alert citizens about a missing older adult. These public alerts contain brief information about the missing person that could allow the public to assist in locating them. Evidence on the effectiveness of American silver alert programs varies.<sup>13, 14</sup>

In Canada, police services use social media (e.g., Twitter and Facebook) to send “alerts” when a vulnerable adult is missing.<sup>15</sup> However, there is no emergency alert system used for vulnerable adults in the way Amber Alerts are triggered. Older adults who go missing are higher in number and typically not related to abductions as in the case of Amber Alerts. Nor are missing older adult incidents comparable to disasters that warrant Canada’s “Alert Ready” system. Blanket provincial, territorial or national emergency alerts for missing older adults would create alert fatigue. Moreover, almost 95% of people who go missing from their home are found within a quarter mile of their last known location.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, localized, community alerts may be more appropriate for persons who go missing on foot. For example, [BC Silver Alert](#), a non-profit community-run silver alert program, was created to fill the gap between political advocacy and action in response to rising missing vulnerable adult incidents.<sup>17</sup>

In 2017, [Manitoba](#) amended its Missing Persons Act to include Silver Alert to “permit the work with broadcasters and others to alert the public when a vulnerable person and another adult with a cognitive impairment is missing”.<sup>18</sup> In 2017, [Alberta](#) also amended its Missing Persons Acts to include Silver Alert. While these amendments recognize the risks of older adults going missing, they do not provide actual programs or introduce new protocols that police services are not already engaged in.<sup>19</sup>

In February 2019, [Petition e-1588](#) calling for a National Silver Alert strategy was presented to the House of Commons. The [Government of Canada](#) tabled a response in April 2019. It highlighted the increased investment for the National Dementia Strategy and delegated the responsibility for alert systems to individual provinces.<sup>20, 21</sup>

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### **How this brief was developed**

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and physical distancing measures in Canada, an [online national forum](#) formed the basis of this brief. The forum followed the format of a Witness Seminar.<sup>22, 23</sup> A Witness Seminar is a method of creating oral history by bringing together key speakers (thought leaders) to discuss selected topics.<sup>24</sup> Witness Seminars are recorded and transcribed to transform an event into evidence that can be used to inform policy.

The three-hour online forum was held via Zoom videoconferencing on November 26, 2020. The national forum featured 5 to 10-minute presentations by the

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following 10 thought leaders on the issue of missing vulnerable adults and feasibility of implementing community alert systems in Canada.

- Mary Beth, person living with dementia, Co-chair and Founder of Dementia Advocacy Canada, and a member of the Ministerial Advisory on Dementia.
- Sam Noh, Co-founder of the BC Silver Alert and the son of Rev. Shin Noh missing since 2013.
- Meredith Rowe, PhD, RN, FAAN, Professor at the University of South Florida College of Nursing.
- Tommy Petillo, Lead Developer for Purple Alert App in Scotland.
- Patty McCallum, Retired Calgary Police Inspector and a member of the Calgary Coordinated Response to Missing Seniors and Sundre Search and Rescue.
- Michael Coyle, Co-founder of the BC Silver Alert and a volunteer with Coquitlam Search and Rescue in British Columbia.
- Christine Thelker, person living with dementia and dementia advocate with Dementia Alliance International.
- Lisa Snodgrass, BN, RN, GNC©, CIC Director, Clinical Practice Shannex Inc.
- Kim Savard, Program Manager of The Way In, a senior's outreach program at Carya
- Franca Gatto, Director of the Aging, Seniors and Dementia Division in the Centre for Health Promotion at the Public Health Agency of Canada.

The national forum was moderated by Lili Liu, professor and dean of the Faculty of Health at the University of Waterloo, and presentations were followed by Question-and-Answer (Q&A) sessions with the public attendees, and a facilitated discussion at the end. The transcripts from the proceedings can be found here: (<https://uwaterloo.ca/aging-innovation-research-program/online-national-forum-community-alert-systems-vulnerable>). The synthesis in this brief presents three key themes that emerged from the transcripts of the online national forum presentations, Q&A, and discussion.

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## **1. A need for community alert system**

### *Limitations of tracking devices*

Thought leaders pointed out that technologies such as Global Positioning System (GPS) devices used to manage the risk of people with dementia going missing are only one strategy. As these devices are not always accessible, can fail, may not always be charged or may be forgotten, other approaches such as community alert systems should be considered. Moreover, tracking technologies can give a false sense of security.

### *Multiple approaches to managing the risk of going missing*

The need for multiple strategies to address the risk of vulnerable adults going missing was highlighted by thought leaders. Community alert systems should not be an “absolute solution” but used alongside other strategies such as preventative approaches (e.g., return home interviews), and locator technologies. Strategies must also take into consideration vulnerable adults who go missing while driving.

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For example, the Silver Alert program in the United States uses the highway alert notifications to publicize people with dementia who go missing while driving or taking public transit.

### *Community involvement*

There is a role for local communities in locating missing persons. Involvement of a community in locating missing vulnerable adults may reduce recovery time and minimize the trauma associated with going missing not only for care partners but also for first responders, such as search and rescue (SAR) teams. Also, there needs to be a clear direction for the public on what to do if they recognize the missing person.

### *Education*

There is a need for public education on the risk of people living with dementia going missing and the potential benefits of community alert systems. There is also a need to address the misconceptions and stigma of dementia and “wandering”. Although people living with dementia may be at risk of getting lost and going missing, not all vulnerable adults who “go for walks” get lost. Also, Canadians need to be aware of vulnerable adults who live alone and those with young onset dementia who may not fit the typical description of older adults who are at risk. Another key aspect of education is training first responders, such as police and SAR personnel, to recognize when a person living with dementia is lost. It is also essential for first responders to receive training on how to approach and communicate with persons living with dementia.

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## **2. Considerations for implementation of alert systems**

### *Privacy issues*

Thought leaders expressed concerns about the legislation on privacy and implications for adopting community alert systems and data sharing in Canada. Information about missing persons provided by care partners in Canada must be vetted by police services before being released through social media to the public.<sup>15, 25, 26</sup> Privacy legislations in other countries differ and thus, in some countries, community alert systems may not need to be vetted by police organizations. For example, Purple Alert, a free mobile app, is managed by Alzheimer Scotland.<sup>27</sup> Care partners can upload information such as the photo and physical description of the missing person on the app as well as provide the same information to the police to assist them in case their relative goes missing. Anyone who downloads the app receives notifications and information about the missing person and can contact the care partner directly via the app if they recognize the missing person. It is imperative to address legislation on how data can be used and shared to successfully implement community alert systems in Canada. Also, security measures should be put in place to protect the data of people living with dementia.

### *Alert fatigue*

Due to high number of missing incidents involving people living with dementia, the frequency of alerts has the potential to create alert fatigue. Therefore, measures to address this issue are needed. For example, community alert systems should be based on an opt in system and app users could indicate preferred geographical

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location, with options on how to receive notifications or alerts about missing persons.

***Alert systems should use a person-centered approach***

Thought leaders addressed the need for community alert systems to be implemented using a person-centered approach. An important aspect of a person-centered approach is to understand vulnerable adults, their needs, and history or risk of going missing by involving them in the implementation of community alert systems. The use of community alert systems should promote the dignity as well as respect the rights of people with dementia to express their choice and freedom of movement.

***Geotargeted approach and information sharing***

Thought leaders identified that community alert systems should provide timely and relevant information about a missing person (e.g., photo, physical descriptions, places of interests) to appropriate people within the geographical location where the person went missing in real time with prior consent from the missing person or care partners. Community alert systems should give clear direction to the public on what to do if they come across the missing person. A geotargeted approach ensures that the public only receives priority alerts. This helps minimize alert fatigue by sending notifications about missing persons through the media and social media, and not necessarily through text and alarms. Users have the option to choose how, and if, an alert is received. This approach does not automatically interrupt public broadcasts. There are questions about the right amount of information to share about a missing person. Preferably this is decided by individuals at risk and their care partners in advance. Other information such as the medical history of the missing person should be shared on a case-by-case basis.

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**3. Strategies for implementation of alert systems**

***Use a collaborative approach to engage stakeholders in decision-making***

A call was made to policy makers at all levels – federal, provincial or territorial and municipal to support the implementation of alert systems and address legislation issues. Thought leaders discussed the need for a collaborative approach to engage all stakeholders such as the government across all levels, people living with dementia, care partners, care homes, community organizations, SAR teams, police organizations, researchers, and health professionals to discuss best practices and approaches to implement alert systems and share resources across provinces. This collaborative approach is highlighted as one of the pillars of Canada's National Dementia Strategy.<sup>28</sup> One strategy for stakeholder collaboration is to create national working groups to facilitate the implementation of community alert systems. An important outcome of collaboration is providing support for people living with dementia and care partners before and after missing incidents and connecting them with available resources in the community. Alzheimer societies and community organizations for seniors are well-positioned to provide persons living with dementia and care partners information about community resources and recommended strategies or tools for reducing the risk of a person living with dementia going missing.

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### *Leverage existing technology*

Thought leaders pointed to the rapid changes in technology and high costs of developing community alert systems. Existing tools such as the provincial Alert Ready system and existing social media apps such as Twitter and Facebook could be leveraged to reduce the cost of developing community alert systems.

Governments across all levels and stakeholders should work with app developers. For example, B.C. Silver Alert has the capacity to be extended across Canada.

Community alert systems must also include measures to address false alarms and use geographical locations to minimize alert fatigue. However, there are concerns about commercialization of products in Canada as apps developed in other countries are not necessarily transferable into the Canadian market due to legislation and funding concerns. Sustainability of an alert system in the Canadian market requires support from policy makers.

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### Next steps

Liu and her research team ([Aging and Innovation Research Program](#)) are planning a series of consultation meetings with community organizations and policy makers across levels of government to discuss this policy brief and collaborative approaches to implement community alert systems in Canada.<sup>29</sup> If you are interested, please contact us at [airp@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:airp@uwaterloo.ca).

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