



# AMBER Alert

## Field Guide for Law Enforcement Officers



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The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance; the Bureau of Justice Statistics; the National Institute of Justice; the Office for Victims of Crime; and the Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking.

# **AMBER Alert**

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May 2019  
NCJ 252795

This document was prepared under cooperative agreement number 2017-MC-FX-K003 from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice.

The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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# I

## Introduction

Reports of endangered missing and abducted children may be among the most difficult, challenging, and emotionally charged cases that law enforcement first responders and investigators will ever experience. Each stage of the case, from the initial call through recovery, forms a critical component of a thorough child recovery response. Public safety agencies must provide their staff with the tools and training that enable them to act swiftly and decisively when confronted with these types of cases. An immediate and comprehensive response enhances the likelihood of accumulating evidence or information that might otherwise be lost during the critical, early stages of an investigation.

As first responders in a missing child investigation, local law enforcement plays a critical role in the overall life cycle of the investigation and the use of the AMBER Alert public notification system, if warranted.

The AMBER Alert system is useful only when agencies know how and when to activate an alert. Agency policies and procedures should clearly outline the investigative response to a missing child, to include the procedures and lines of authority for requesting an AMBER Alert. Law enforcement's investigative processes are inherently separate and different from the AMBER Alert process in a child abduction case. They may involve different agencies, personnel, and timing; however, they are still inextricably connected and interdependent if an AMBER Alert is ultimately issued. An effective initial response by law enforcement feeds the core information to the authorities who can issue an AMBER Alert. A successful alert, in turn, will trigger a significant influx of tips and leads in the case.

This guide is designed to help law enforcement better understand how to avoid or mitigate critical pitfalls in a child abduction case. These can include delays in requesting an AMBER Alert due to officers not knowing whom to call and what core information to provide for an effective alert. It is also critical for law enforcement officers to know that it is okay to call the AMBER Alert Coordinator early in the case to discuss options for the alert, even as information is coming together in the investigation.

The following information was developed by subject matter experts who have been active in AMBER Alert programs throughout the country. It includes the following suggested practices for some key areas of the law enforcement response:

- Initial on-scene response and investigation (patrol, supervisory officers, and investigators);
- Establishment of lead/tip call centers and management of lead/tip information;
- Use of Child Abduction Response Teams (CART);
- Deployment of search and recovery operations;
- Use of volunteers;
- Officers' interactions with family members; and
- The role and responsibilities of a Public Information Officer (PIO).



## AMBER ALERT ISSUANCE CRITERIA AND STATE AMBER ALERT PROGRAM CONTACT INFORMATION

U.S. Department of Justice-recommended guidelines for issuance of an AMBER Alert can be found on the [AMBER Alert](#) and on [The AMBER Advocate](#) websites.

For an interactive map of state AMBER Alert program contact information, visit the [Meet our Partners](#) page on The AMBER Advocate website.

Another 24/7 resource for AMBER Alert assistance is the [National Center for Missing and Exploited Children](#): 1-800-THE-LOST.



# 1

## Initial On-Scene Response and Investigation

### Telecommunications and Patrol First Responders

The investigation begins when the call is received by the telecommunicator, who works carefully through a pre-defined intake protocol to gather key information about the location and nature of the emergency, along with identifying information on the child, suspect (if known), and vehicle (if known). Based on call intake, the telecommunicator allocates appropriate resources and works with patrol officers to ensure a rapid on-scene response. The telecommunicator continues to be part of the initial response by taking in additional information via phone and radio transmissions, documenting all information for later retrieval and analysis. Patrol officers should proceed directly to the scene, secure appropriate locations, identify and interview family members and witnesses, establish perimeters, and work to verify and build on the information gathered during initial call intake. Additional tasks can include preliminary search and canvass efforts, if appropriate. All of these actions support swift, thorough, and accurate information gathering for the creation of a missing person entry and associated records on the suspect and vehicle involved. By federal mandate, this information is entered into the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) National Crime Information Center (NCIC) within two hours of the first report of the missing child. Activation of an AMBER Alert should be considered at the earliest stages of the response, and appropriate authority should be given to field personnel when the need for these resources is identified.



## Investigation Response

For investigators, the response conducted cooperatively by telecommunications and patrol forms a foundation from which to effectively move the case forward – with canvass, search, interviews, and forensics – as all parties work rapidly and strategically to locate and safely recover the missing child. The information gathered during the preliminary investigation is supplemented through continued efforts and can lead to a request for an AMBER Alert at any point in this process. If it is determined that the case will be better handled through other methods available to the department, such as an Endangered Missing Advisory (EMA), the AMBER Alert Coordinator will advise on the alternative and direct that process as well. See [Guide for Implementing or Enhancing an Endangered Missing Advisory](#) for more information.

To activate an AMBER Alert, the AMBER Alert Coordinator must be confident that an abduction has occurred, the criteria for activation have been met, and the local agency has ruled out any other possibilities for the child’s disappearance. Because every minute matters in such situations, as much information as possible must be collected in the early stages of the investigation and carefully assessed to drive the best decision about alerting the public in the case. It is important to remember that the AMBER Alert is just one tool, albeit an important and powerful one when warranted, that can be utilized when a child is abducted. Other investigative and search techniques must also be used rapidly and effectively in the initial stages of the investigation.



### PATROL AND INVESTIGATIVE FIELD RESPONSE CHECKLISTS

Detailed response checklists for patrol officers, supervisors, and investigators are available for download on the AMBER Alert Best Practices [resource collection page](#) on The AMBER Advocate website.

## **Missing Child Information**

During the initial call intake, patrol officers' first response, and preliminary field investigation, law enforcement is working to obtain, verify, and build out the following information about the missing child.

### **Primary Identifiers**

Primary identifiers are those most recognizable for visual identification by officers and the public, and those that are immediately needed for the telecommunicator to begin NCIC entry:

- Name, including nicknames;
- Date of birth;
- Race;
- Gender;
- Physical description (height, weight, hair color, eye color, scars/marks/tattoos, clothing last seen wearing);
- Physical anomalies or recognizable physical attributes such as a limp, tick, or physical behavior;
- Notable items the child may be carrying, such as a backpack, purse, or comfort item such as a special blanket, doll, or stuffed animal; and
- Current and realistic photographs, digital images, and videos of the child as he/she looks every day.

### **Caution/Medical Information**

Advisories urging caution and to provide medical information are critical for notifying first responders and other law enforcement officers about any medical conditions the child may have or immediate threats to the child's physical safety, such as known or suspected weapons:

- Blood type, if known;
- Medical conditions (such as diabetes, asthma, epilepsy);
- Neurological/behavioral conditions (autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, attention deficit disorder);
- Medications the missing child is taking or needs to take (name, type, such as pill, injection, or inhaler) and time last taken, if known; and
- Known or suspected weapons involved with the child's disappearance or abduction.

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INVESTIGATION

### **Additional Information**

The following information is important for packing the NCIC record and getting basic incident, victim, and suspect information to investigators – and to support alerting the public:

- Social Security number;
- The child’s cell phone number, and description/location of any other computer or mobile devices the child has or uses;
- Email address(es);
- Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, or other social media accounts/ screen names; also ask about any online gaming platforms/sites the child uses;
- Reasons why the reporting person believes the child is missing;
- The child’s normal routines and any past history of running away;
- Any circumstances that may indicate the disappearance was not voluntary and the child may be in imminent danger;
- Name and location of the child’s school;
- Name and location of the child’s dentist and primary care physician, if known; and
- Name and location/address of any friends the child could be with or could have spoken to at/around the time of the disappearance or abduction.

### **Suspect Information**

Law enforcement should work from initial call intake through the field investigation to obtain, verify, and build out the following information about the abductor, if known:

- Name, including any aliases or nicknames;
- Relationship to the missing child (e.g., family member, friend/associate, acquaintance, stranger to the child);
- Race;
- Gender;
- Physical description (height, weight, hair color, eye color, scars/marks/ tattoos, clothing last seen wearing);
- Physical anomalies or other recognizable physical attributes;
- Date of birth;
- Vehicle information if one is known or suspected to be used in the crime: color, year, make, model, body (rust, dents, stickers), license/tag, state of tag;

- Any known or suspected weapons used/in possession of the suspect;
- Criminal history;
- Companions or associates the suspect may be with or going to see;
- Possible direction of or routes of travel – including any public transit the suspect may be likely to use;
- Places the suspect may be going;
- Cell phone number;
- Email address(es);
- Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, or other social media accounts/ screen names; and
- Any online gaming platforms/sites the suspect is known to use or suspected of using.

## **National Crime Information Center Database (NCIC) Entry**

As soon as it has been determined that the child is missing and sufficient information is obtained, the agency should enter the information into the NCIC database. Section 104 of the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006 amended the reporting requirement set forth in Section 3702 of the Crime Control Act of 1990 (42 U.S.C. 5780) by changing “immediately” to “within two (2) hours of receipt.” The FBI guidelines further define the entry criteria as “two (2) hours after enough information has been obtained to enable the entry into NCIC.”

The appropriate flag should be set to indicate either Child Abduction (CA) or AMBER Alert (AA). The entry should include as much information as the responding officer can provide, including realistic/current **images of the child**. The **miscellaneous field should be used for all pertinent details** of the case for which there are no defined entry fields.

The investigator should work with telecommunications staff to ensure regular review and update/modification of the NCIC record as new information is gathered in the case through interviews, canvassing, and searches. This includes cancellation of the NCIC record when the child has been safely recovered. The record should be canceled only after full confirmation that the missing child has been found is received from law enforcement personnel.

## **Criteria for Adding Persons With Information (PWI) in the Case**

NCIC provides a searchable Persons With Information (PWI) field where the details of a person who may have information about the child, or who is possibly connected to the missing child, can be added and linked to the child's record when a warrant has not been issued. The person must have been identified to the public, either through an AMBER Alert or other notification; must be believed to have relevant information that could aid in locating the child; and cannot be located, with time being of the essence. For questions about entering and managing missing person records in NCIC, review the resource [\*Effective Use of the National Crime Information Center Database With Missing Child Incidents\*](#). To obtain the FBI's [\*Data Collection Entry Guide for Missing Persons\*](#), or for more information on PWI or other NCIC functions, contact NCIC at 304-625-3000.

# 2

## Establishing Leads/Tips Call Centers and Leads Management

Once an AMBER Alert has been issued, the influx of information to the investigating agency will increase exponentially. The success of the ongoing investigation depends on the ability of law enforcement agencies to receive, process, and prioritize leads and tips without dropping calls or otherwise missing incoming leads received by text message, social media, or field report. Coordination of this critical function is vital to the successful recovery of a missing child and possible prosecution of the offender(s). Many times, lack of prior planning may force an agency to direct calls into its existing law enforcement communications center via 9-1-1 or other published emergency lines. Depending on the number of operational consoles and phone lines, and how these are staffed, this can bottleneck an agency's capacity to process normal calls for service while attempting to take in tips, disseminate them, and properly manage records for investigative leads in the case.

A series of activities should be performed to ensure the effective operation of a tips and leads management system. These activities include:

- Securing equipment and establishing use agreements (if shared between agencies) for regional phone and/or computer banks;
- Identifying, procuring, and performing testing and technical training on call-stacking/rollover systems, electronic leads capture, dissemination, and tracking;
- Establishing a plan that outlines all phone and text numbers available and authorized for use by the public, as well as any unpublished numbers to be used by law enforcement and other authorized partners in the case;

- Creating call-out notification and staffing plans;
- Developing plans and procedures for intake of calls and texts, including detailed training for all staff; and
- Establishing contingency procedures for outside agency support in those cases that become long-term or otherwise require multi-agency and/or jurisdictional response.



#### CALL INTAKE AND LEADS MANAGEMENT OPERATIONS PLANNING

Consider establishing an agreement with the Emergency Operations/ Fusion Center, if one is available in your area, for use of their joint communications area during an AMBER Alert activation. This allows leveraging of existing infrastructure to accommodate the volume of calls that may be received with an active AMBER Alert.

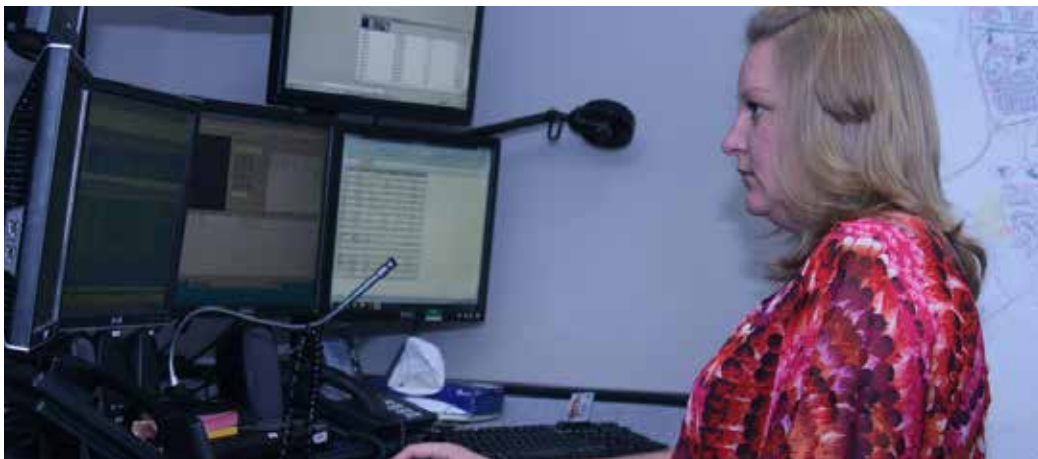
For resources in this area, visit the AMBER Alert Best Practices [resource collection page](#) on The AMBER Advocate website.

## Planning for Call Intake and Leads Management Technologies and Staffing Needs

Rapid and coordinated sharing of case information between all area law enforcement communication centers will help to mitigate the problem of failing to route all calls relating to the child abduction to the agency overseeing the investigation. Appropriate venues that could be utilized for such an incident should be researched prior to the emergency to avoid having to route case-related calls through an active dispatch center that will still have to maintain day-to-day operations. The designated call center should have caller ID, phone line recording to capture all conversations, as well as stacking and rollover capabilities. These functionalities will help to ensure that all calls are answered as swiftly as possible, that pertinent data and records can be verified, and that calls are not lost.

Child abduction incidents can become overwhelming in the amount of information generated by the activation of an AMBER Alert and subsequent community involvement. Managing that information as part of the investigation leaves no room for error in the intake, storage, analysis, and retrieval of data coming from a multitude of sources. Proper planning, research, and selection of a designated leads management system should be undertaken before any incident that might involve its deployment and use. Ongoing training should develop and maintain staff proficiency in that designated system, and periodic testing will help to ensure that both the staff and the system will be ready at the needed time. Methods for obtaining additional resources, including resource sharing and vendor assistance, should be explored to support enhancements to the call intake and leads management system.

Proper staffing and supervision structures must be in place to ensure effective oversight, operation, and monitoring of the tips intake and leads management system implemented for your agency and/or jurisdiction (if a multi-agency partnership). Workstations should be staffed by specially trained personnel who have scripted questions and functional working knowledge of the leads tracking or case management system in place. Documented workflow procedures that guarantee all information is evaluated, routed, followed up on, and documented in a consistent manner will ensure a proper response to every call taken and lead developed. Although volunteers are sometimes used for this operation, doing so is not recommended. Best practices include using experienced call-takers/telecommunicators and sworn officers, who are better prepared to perform thorough intake, prioritization, investigation, and management of leads.



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## Use of Child Abduction Response Teams (CART)

# 3

Like an AMBER Alert, a Child Abduction Response Team (CART) is a resource that law enforcement agencies can employ in an abduction incident or in situations where a child is missing and believed to be in danger. While activation of a CART may occur in a case, it should never supersede the handling agency's immediate and initial response and investigative work.

A CART is a multi-agency, often multi-jurisdictional team of professionals who are trained and equipped to respond in the search and recovery of an endangered missing or abducted child. The CART strategy incorporates three elements: trained individuals with established roles and assignments, a readymade list of equipment available to aid in the search, and a network of multi-disciplinary resources the team can utilize in the investigation. If an agency participates in or has access to a CART, it should consider requesting the team's activation very early in the investigation to assist in the multitude of tasks that will need to be accomplished, such as conducting a neighborhood canvass, accounting for sex offenders in the area, and following up on leads generated by public alerting. Much like SWAT, CART provides assistance and support for these low frequency but extremely high criticality responses. More than 300 active CARTs representing 48 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the Bahamas, and Canada have received training through the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's AMBER Alert Training and Technical Assistance Program. For more information about CART training or establishing a CART program, visit [The AMBER Advocate website's CART Resource collection](#).



# 4

## Search and Canvass Operations

Many law enforcement agencies do not have an established plan or procedures for conducting canvassing or a search as part of a missing child investigation. As with any skill set, these abilities can erode over time if not practiced regularly. While the CART should bring in highly trained team members to build on early efforts, it is very important that all agencies have the knowledge and skills to effectively begin this process and establish an effective foundation for subsequent investigative efforts. A historical analysis of canvass and search operations reveals a number of serious problems that have occurred during major investigations:

- Missed witnesses;
- Missed, damaged, or destroyed physical evidence;
- Failure to identify and document all parties residing/present in homes and businesses canvassed;
- Poor documentation of interviews, places that have been searched/canvassed, crime scenes, and other investigative work conducted;
- Poor coordination and centralization of documentation/records and updates as field personnel work the case, resulting in confusion, duplication of efforts, and/or missed leads;
- Officers being unaware that they have had contact with suspects;
- Delays in initiating formal search activities;
- Difficulty in obtaining feedback from those performing canvass operations;
- Ambiguous chain of command or lines of authority for operations;

- Inadequate use of specialized resources available in the area;
- Poor interagency communications, both from a lack of contact information and from technical/interoperability issues;
- Lack of preparedness for managing unanticipated volunteer response; and
- Unplanned and/or poorly managed work with the media to protect the integrity of information and provide regular updates in the case.

The importance of conducting a thorough, organized neighborhood canvass using only trained professionals (and, whenever possible, sworn law enforcement officers) with scripted questions cannot be overstated. These trained resources should be dedicated in their assignment and not subject to being called away or reassigned until after the canvass of the assigned area is completed. The information gained through these canvass efforts must be analyzed as part of the lead management process to ensure that all persons and locations within a designated area are covered prior to deeming that area “complete.”

Canvass operations are manpower-intensive endeavors that will take a significant amount of time to perform correctly. The procedures listed below are based on the findings of the [Case Management for Missing Children Homicide Investigation Study](#), conducted by the Washington State Attorney General and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Practitioners recommend that investigations personnel complete these actions as part of their canvass operations.

- **Repeat the neighborhood canvass the day following the abduction**, beginning with areas where the suspect may have been 30 minutes before the actual time of the abduction. The study found that killers were in the area of initial contact in 67 percent of the cases studied – often living in the area or engaging in normal activity, such as employment or other routine business. Additional canvass efforts should be repeated as needed on the same day of the week and same day of the month as the abduction to reach as many persons with information as possible.
- **Look at the area from different vantage points**; obtain and study current aerial pictures and/or current satellite imagery, if possible. Researchers found that the victim’s last known location was usually very close to the site of the initial contact between the killer and the victim. When police did not know the killer’s initial contact site, case solvability dropped to just 24 percent, as opposed to nearly 80 percent when police had information about the initial contact site.

- **Pay close attention to individuals who have recently moved into or out of the area.** The study revealed that after the crime was committed, 16 percent of murderers left town and 10 percent interjected themselves into the murder investigation, usually during the search operation.
- **Check all registered sex offenders in the area and verify this information** against any database that contains information about these individuals. The local agency can utilize its state sex offender registry, the [National Sex Offender Registry](#), and can contact the [National Center for Missing & Exploited Children \(NCMEC\)](#) 24/7 at 1-800-843-5678 for support in this critical area of the investigation. Keep in mind that there are a large number of non-compliant sex offenders across the country, and these individuals will be singled out in an ongoing investigation only by identifying all persons associated with a certain area during canvass operations.
- **Gather information about cellular and internet-connected devices.** Agencies should utilize local, state, or federal subject matter experts to obtain data from cellular and internet service providers that are critical in determining a suspect's and/or a victim's activity, including possible location or routes of travel. This can help to corroborate witness statements regarding the missing child and/or suspect. If resources are not available at the local or state level, the U.S. Marshal's Service can assist agencies with this work. Additionally, the [Internet Crimes Against Children \(ICAC\) Task Force](#) in operation within the state can assist with this work.

# Use of Volunteers

# 5

Volunteers can be an asset in the search and recovery of a missing child. However, if not properly screened, trained, and prepared, they can compromise the operation. An agency-assigned volunteer coordinator should create a plan that specifies how volunteers will be used as a resource in missing child cases.

## Types of Volunteers

Agencies can incorporate a volunteer protocol within their plan in one of two ways. Best practice emphasizes proactive planning for use of volunteers by identifying and establishing procedures for call-out of volunteer groups that are pre-selected and trained for use with missing child incidents. Such groups include local search and rescue teams, citizen police academy graduates, and auxiliary police officers as well as Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT) already established in many communities across the country. Other agencies maintain an ongoing volunteer recruitment program to identify and prepare members for use in various agency operations.

If an agency does not have the ability to utilize a predetermined volunteer contingent, at minimum they should specify clear policy and procedures for requesting, selecting, and screening volunteers on a case-by-case basis. Policy should also detail the types of assignments for which volunteers may be used. Being prepared to address spontaneous volunteers who will arrive onsite during active incidents to offer their services is critical. Without a plan for vetting and training spontaneous volunteers, including an orientation process, these volunteers are very



## VOLUNTEER RESOURCES



Agencies may identify and proactively establish agreements with local, regional, state, or national groups to provide pre-vetted and trained personnel assistance with leads/tips management and field support, such as search and rescue functions. Examples would include:

- The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children
  - » Project ALERT (forensics and biometrics support for law enforcement);
  - » Team HOPE (surviving families who support one another during and after cases);
  - » Team Adam (on-scene support to law enforcement and families);
- Emergency response teams;
- Search and rescue teams;
- Explorers, recruits, and military reserve units;
- Citizen police academy participants and alumni; and
- National Guard units.

The U.S. military is authorized to assist local jurisdictions in the event of a missing child. Contact the Air Force Rescue Coordination Center Console Operations at 850-283-5955.

likely to create extra work for law enforcement officers who are forced to direct volunteers rather than focus on their primary job, which can negatively impact investigative response. Although both established volunteer groups and individual ad-hoc volunteers can offer skills and resources before, during, and after an emergency, agencies must ensure they are prepared to utilize them effectively and appropriately during active cases.

## Pre-Planning and Management of Volunteers

As previously emphasized, departments should do everything possible to have a pre-established team of volunteers to allow time for vetting, background checks, and management of records related to the volunteers involved. When spontaneous volunteer contingents are used, many of these critically important functions are not feasible due to time constraints and other logistics, and their omission can potentially jeopardize the investigation.

Management of volunteers should include the following actions:

- Conduct background checks on volunteers or use volunteers who have already been cleared by background checks;
- Ensure volunteers have correctly completed registration and waiver of liability forms;
- Photograph all volunteers and include them on identification badges distributed during active use/events (if photos are not possible, at minimum include the volunteer's full name);
- Maintain a volunteer log with name, photo, date of birth, phone, address, email, skills/expertise relative to their role, and all other agency-mandated information; update this information at least quarterly; and
- Hold periodic training sessions, to include:
  - » Current issues, legal updates, and investigative findings having implications for their work in assisting with endangered missing and abducted child cases;
  - » Protocols to be followed during the search, including personal/team safety, areas authorized for search, and reporting actions for witnessed events or locating evidence; and
  - » Mock activation/call-out exercises and training debriefs.

Volunteer management resources, such as sample applications and other forms/templates, are available for download in the [CART Resource collection on The AMBER Advocate website](#).

## **Active Incidents: Coordinating Volunteers**

During active incidents, the volunteer coordinator should take the following actions:

- Brief volunteers properly prior to deployment as to assignment and expectations;
- Ensure that volunteers are closely supervised throughout the duration of the incident (consider assigning a law enforcement officer or a trained/vetted volunteer supervisor to each search group);
- Instruct volunteers not to talk to the media – all announcements and updates will come only from the designated media representative;
- Instruct volunteers to be mindful of evidence they may encounter and to not remove or touch any items they may find;
- Remind volunteers that they cannot discuss case-related activities with family or friends;
- Maintain control over the search, volunteers, public safety personnel, and others on the scene; and
- Check with volunteers periodically for signs of stress or fatigue (rotate volunteers as needed to ensure their safety and effective execution of duties).

Ensure that food and drink, along with necessary equipment, are provided during the search. When the search has concluded, the coordinator should take the following actions:

- Provide a comprehensive debriefing for volunteers to include any officers or other employed personnel who were assigned to volunteer operations. Discuss what went well and what should be done differently with future incidents to promote increased safety and effective response.
- Give volunteers as much information about the case as the investigation will allow, while emphasizing the confidential nature of information concerning the case and clearly noting the reasoning for any information that cannot be disclosed at this juncture.
- Thank volunteers for helping with the search. If possible, send letters of appreciation within two weeks of the event. Taking care of volunteers and expressing thanks is the best way to promote participation in future searches.



### **Post-Incident: Volunteer After-Care**

The work of search and rescue volunteers in endangered missing and abducted child cases can be both physically and emotionally taxing, with long-lasting impacts that may need support to resolve. If volunteers are not already part of a professional search organization that provides after-care such as debriefs, counseling, and grief support, it is important for law enforcement to identify local resource providers to whom volunteers can be referred if needed.





# 6

## The Family's Perspective: Officers' Interaction With Families

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the AMBER Alert Training and Technical Assistance Program convene an annual roundtable event during which family members and survivors of missing and abducted children come together to share their experiences and to help law enforcement better understand how enduring the disappearance or abduction of a child or sibling affects them. In the face of the anxiety, fear, and horror that comes with these incidents, law enforcement's approach to working with the family during initial response, public alerting, ongoing investigation, and court prosecution proceedings has profound and lifelong impacts on the family – and the victim if safely recovered.

### OFFICE OF JUVENILE JUSTICE AND DELINQUENCY PREVENTION – AMBER ALERT TRAINING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FAMILY ROUNDTABLE EVENTS



AMBER Alert Coordinators and other AMBER Alert Partners can read past Family Roundtable Reports by logging into The AMBER Advocate website's Partners Portal and visiting the [Partner Resources](#) area.

Resources for families can be found at The AMBER Advocate website's [Community Resources](#) area.

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children's website has a [Victims and Family Support](#) page and a [Publications](#) page.

Invaluable insights and recommendations on what law enforcement did well, and what they could have done better, have been gained from these roundtable events.

- Family advocates should be identified by law enforcement agencies, and call-out/response agreements established to ensure that an advocate can be assigned to the family as early in the case as possible. Family advocates provide a critically important liaison between the investigative operations and the needs of the family, helping in the following ways:
  - » Communicating information and updates;
  - » Ensuring the family understands what is happening in the case and why;
  - » Assisting the family in dealing with media inquiries;
  - » Supporting the family during the recovery and/or reunification phase of the case; and
  - » Supporting the family through prosecutorial developments and court appearances as the case is adjudicated.
- In-service training on policies and procedures to be followed with missing children cases should be mandated for first responders, including telecommunicators and patrol officers, with retraining at least once every two years:
  - » First responders and investigative officers should be trained on how to interview and communicate with parents and other family members in a way that allows them to gather information while being sensitive to what the family members are going through; and
  - » Crime scene professionals should be trained on the importance of evidence collection and preservation in missing children cases.
- Every first responder should utilize protocols and checklists when working a case to ensure that critical actions are not inadvertently omitted during the chaos often associated with these types of events.
- Law enforcement agencies should have the capability to rapidly deploy canvassing as well as search and rescue resources (such as K-9 tracking, underwater search/rescue, and geo-tracking/mapping) in endangered missing and abducted child cases.
- Officers should act immediately and treat the case as an endangered missing child case unless and until significant facts are confirmed otherwise.

- Officers should ask the parents for recent photos or digital images (including video) that depict the missing child as he or she looks now/realistically.
- Officers should treat the home as a crime scene but attempt to leave the home in the condition in which they found it.
- Officers should give parents the details, even the hard ones, before they give information to the media.
- Officers should never assume the child is a runaway or make statements such as “They will probably come home in a few days.” If the missing child is an adolescent or teenager, law enforcement should not stereotype him or her as a runaway. This assumption can hinder the immediate implementation of comprehensive recovery actions. It is important for law enforcement to proceed based on what the parents are saying and verify the information accordingly.
- Law enforcement should understand compliant behavior and the dynamics of abduction-luring, also known as “learned helplessness,” so as not to make assumptions or draw incorrect conclusions when investigating cases where a child willingly left or stayed with the abductor, even if the child may have had opportunities to escape.
- The family’s socioeconomic status should have no bearing on how law enforcement handles a case.



# Managing Media Inquiries and Coverage

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Keeping the child's image in the mind of the public is key to the investigation. The intense media coverage during an AMBER Alert often supports recovery of the child and in some cases has resulted in the abductor releasing the child to avoid apprehension.

No law enforcement agency should be without a Public Information Officer (PIO) during these critical incidents. The PIO's presence will be particularly prominent during the early stages of a case when press conferences, media interviews, and similar events will keep his/her name and face, but more importantly the child's name and face, in the public eye. The PIO establishes the overall tone with the media and public, and works to manage the flow of information based on legal restrictions and agency policies.

Ideally, the PIO should be involved from the very beginning of incident command to ensure that the appropriate information is released to the media and to avoid any misinformation being an issue with the media. The best way to ensure the PIO is included in all aspects of the incident's progression in terms of media updates and public reporting is to define the PIO's responsibilities clearly in the law enforcement agency's missing child policies and procedures, to include special considerations for cases in which public alerting (AMBER Alert or an Endangered Missing Advisory) is utilized.

A law enforcement chief executive officer (CEO) once commented that "activating an AMBER Alert is like sending up a flare asking every media outlet to critique the way you are handling



your investigation.” The PIO role, when executed effectively, helps to mitigate misinformation and unfounded criticism by facilitating the media’s accurate coverage of when and why an AMBER Alert or other public alerting tool was activated, along with providing precise information that enables the public to look out for and report useful tips or leads to law enforcement.

## **The Importance of Media Training for All Agency Personnel**

While it is important to designate a specific face and message for the incident in the form of a consistent PIO, every member of all the agencies involved needs to be aware of his/her role in information security. With the proliferation of news outlets and the need to remain ahead of their competitors in the 24 hour news cycle, the tactics of members of the media have become increasingly aggressive and multi-faceted. While reporters and journalists will continue to seek out information through traditional means, such as news releases and press briefings, they will also actively seek out and solicit news sources close to the investigation. This has been seen with documented cases of media outlets monitoring scanner traffic as well as conducting surveillance on agency parking lots and following vehicles they believe to be heading to locations of interest. Employees of agencies involved in the case, whether sworn or civilian, must know that they could inadvertently become an unintentional “source close to the investigation” if approached by media representatives.

The PIO’s primary function during an endangered missing or abducted child investigation is to convey accurate and timely information from the law enforcement agency handling the case to the public via traditional media outlets, as well as website and social media accounts managed by the agency, to keep the child’s image and the story in the news. Through planning and regular communication, the PIO also works to build and maintain an effective partnership between the media and law enforcement in working to promote swift location and safe recovery of missing children.

## **Choosing a Public Information Officer**

Ideally, the PIO should be employed full time for the law enforcement agency and have a strong functional knowledge of policy and procedures for the agency's release of information to the public via the media. While larger agencies usually have a full-time PIO on staff, smaller departments often lack the personnel or resources to employ a dedicated PIO. In this case, they may assign the responsibility on an as-needed basis to another officer, or rely on other agencies within their jurisdiction or the state police to provide this service. Regardless of the approach to fulfilling this important role, any officer designated as a PIO should then be trained and prepared to work effectively with the media and the public when incidents occur.

The law enforcement agency's CEO must have confidence in the PIO, and the PIO must be able to function within the CEO's authority. While the PIO's public-facing role is to partner with the media to provide the public with information about the case, the PIO must maintain the focus on the primary goal, which is to protect the investigation and law enforcement's ability to safely recover the missing child. To do this effectively, the PIO must have fluid access to information, key agency personnel (including the chief or sheriff), the crime scene area, and other areas where information may be generated.

## **Duties of a Public Information Officer**

### **Core Areas of Work**

The PIO works to accomplish these essential, overarching functions:

- Notifies the public through all available resources to be on the lookout for the missing child;
- Enhances media coverage of the missing child incident by providing photographs, videos, and other visual aids to help identify the victim(s) and/ or suspect(s) and the vehicle(s) used in the abduction;
- Helps oversee and coordinate all social media campaigns to recover the missing child;
- Ensures the story stays alive by providing regular updates with accurate and timely information appropriate for sharing with the public;

- Gauges public opinions and media perceptions for the investigating agency, addressing any issues and ensuring the focus stays on the child;
- Anticipates possible worst-case scenarios and prepares the agency's response to the types of questions likely to accompany such scenarios; and
- Provides family members and others involved with effective strategies for conducting media interviews and press conferences – with a focus on their privacy, dignity, and well-being – while also safeguarding the investigatory details of the case.

### **Organizing Media Briefings**

The PIO should be responsible for all logistics involving media briefings, including creating the briefing schedule, establishing the location of the briefings (away from the command center if possible), and securing parking and staging areas for media vehicles.

When conducting media briefings, the PIO should take the following actions:

- Choose a location for the briefing area that will meet the needs of both investigators and the media. Consider parking lots and other public areas rather than law enforcement headquarters;
- Plan for a worst-case scenario by anticipating all types of questions likely to arise in such a scenario and the agency's response;
- Work with family members to prepare them if they are to be a part of the briefing. Use a victim advocate to assist and prepare the family;
- Work with media technicians to supply image, audio, and video content (approved by incident command) to be broadcast as part of media briefings and newscast updates;
- Set the tone for the media briefing. Maintain control of the entire briefing environment (e.g., where it takes place, participants' roles, and structure of the briefing);
- Start every media briefing with an opening statement by an appropriate law enforcement official followed by a question-and-answer dialog (if previously agreed to by law enforcement officials); and
- Provide all appropriate information – in addition to photos and video footage – on the victim, suspect, vehicle, and possibly crime scene or location insofar as it will enhance the public's ability to assist the law enforcement investigation.



## **Responding to False or Unfounded Information**

Rumors and false or misleading information frequently emerge during any law enforcement incident or investigation; endangered missing and abducted child cases are no exception. Because journalists will seek additional information on their own from a victim's family members, friends, and witnesses, rumors can develop quickly. It is important for the PIO to monitor rumors and stay informed about all aspects of the investigation. The PIO is responsible for doing everything possible to ensure that the information delivered to the public is accurate and timely in an effort to mitigate potential problems as the case progresses. The PIO should take the following actions:

- Monitor all media coverage of the incident, including broadcast news, radio, websites, and social media;
- Collect as much information as possible about any rumors that are circulating, correcting information through media updates and postings to agency web pages and social media platforms;
- Contact the appropriate media outlet(s) directly to address incorrect information and supply corrections to be conveyed to the public;
- Recognize that the media are participating voluntarily and do not want to be viewed as an extension of law enforcement. The media respect law enforcement agencies much more when they recognize that the media's primary responsibility is to inform the public independently;
- Be aware that once an AMBER Alert has been activated, the story will be pursued aggressively. This means the angle of the story may change in unpredictable ways. The AMBER Alert process may be analyzed and the criminal investigation scrutinized – all in the public domain, with little or no direction from law enforcement; and
- Be aware that some information the media uncovers may need to be investigated. In most cases, the media will provide a copy of broadcast and/or written materials on request, so make that request before pursuing a court order for seizing the materials.

## **Placement of the Public Information Officer Within the Incident Command System**

The Incident Command System represents a component of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's National Incident Management System protocol as required by U.S. Department of Homeland Security statutory regulations. The PIO should be strategically placed within the agency or jurisdictional Incident Command System to allow him/her to report directly to the incident commander and communicate with all law enforcement personnel in command of the various investigative components of the operation. Access to information is essential for the PIO to establish a smooth flow of information to the public and to monitor how well the media are disseminating details about the incident. A PIO who is involved in the agency's key decision-making processes is positioned to ensure that the media receive only messages that will responsibly inform the public about the agency's search for a missing child.

## **The PIO's Role in the Deactivation Phase of Public Alerting**

When an AMBER Alert is utilized, the alert should be deactivated when the child is recovered, even if the suspect is still at large. The deactivation of an AMBER Alert will likely require the PIO to initiate the following actions:

- Inform victims' families about the most effective ways to deal with media attention and the pros and cons of being interviewed by the media. In addition, the PIO should advise families about information they should and should not discuss, in accordance with the advice of investigators and prosecutors working on the case;
- Work with the prosecuting attorney to ensure that the release of information will not jeopardize the ability to obtain a conviction in the case if the subject was arrested, or if the subject is later located and charged; and
- Acknowledge, on behalf of the agency and its CEO, the contributions of everyone involved – television and radio broadcasters, news organizations, cellular and internet service providers, local businesses, volunteers, government agencies, and law enforcement agencies that supported the effort with coverage, volunteer services, staffing/personnel, and other resources.

# Conclusion

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The work and processes that first responders and investigators undertake when a child is reported missing or abducted are of primary importance for law enforcement in the effective planning, training, and operational response to these critical incidents. The focus of the AMBER Alert Program is to increase the likelihood of safe recovery through immediate public awareness and identification efforts in endangered missing or abducted child cases where public notification can be of benefit to the investigation.

The AMBER Alert process is designed to support existing law enforcement protocols that are initiated as part of the established investigative response to endangered missing and abducted child incidents. The anticipation of, or decision to issue, an AMBER Alert does not replace, rescind, or supersede the work of normal first responder and investigative functions when a child is missing.

The process of gathering the required information and approvals toward the activation of an AMBER Alert may necessitate additional time beyond that which is reasonable for carrying out enforcement and investigative actions. The development and distribution of critical messages and broadcasts regarding the child victims in these cases should not be delayed due to the process of requesting the activation of an AMBER Alert.

Law enforcement agencies must understand how AMBER Alert core activation and notification elements impact their operations



when these incidents occur. Agency staff who coordinate training should work proactively with their state and/or regional AMBER Alert Coordinators to ensure that personnel have the training and operational tools they need to support a functional, working knowledge of how the AMBER Alert process works in their area.

Understanding how AMBER Alerts are requested, what information is needed to support the request, how activation is made, what information will be broadcast and included in other messaging, and how to update the AMBER Alert Coordinator and the media with new developments in the case – all of these components will make law enforcement personnel stronger and more confident contributors to their jurisdictions' AMBER Alert programs. Together, the work of law enforcement and the AMBER Alert program create the best possible chance to rescue endangered missing and abducted children and bring them home safely.

