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CDE # 22397

The Telecommunicator's Role in Activating an AMBER Alert

BY SHEILA HANNA-WILES

Imagine a child outside playing in the yard. The mother goes inside the house to get some lemonade. When she gets back to the yard a few short minutes later, her child is nowhere to be found. She screams her child's name over and over, but there's no response. Panic begins to set in, and she reaches for the phone to dial 9-1-1. The telecommunicator on the other end of the line is empathetic and begins the process of finding the child.

The telecommunicator is the first step in the AMBER

Alert plan. To understand the process, you must understand the scope of the problem, as well as the purpose and history of the AMBER Alert program.

SCOPE & HISTORY

In 1997, the Washington State Attorney General's office conducted a study and later estimated that 100 abducted children are murdered each year, and that 74% of those murders are committed within the first three hours following the abduction.

In 2002, according to NiSmart-2 (the National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Thrownaway Children) and other studies of missing children, an estimated 797,500 children were classified as missing in the United States.

Several different categories are used to classify missing children. The four primary classifications are family abduction, endangered, non-family abduction and lost.

Annually, more than 114,000 children are abducted by non-family members; and more than 300 of those children who are abducted by non-family members stay missing for long periods of time, or they are murdered. More than 450,000 children run away from home annually. More than 350,000 children are abducted by family members annually. And as many as 438,000 children are lost, injured or go missing annually.

One missing child case sparked a nationwide effort to create a process that would help authorities quickly locate missing children. In 1996, Amber Hagerman, a nine-year-old girl from Arlington, Texas, was outside riding her bicycle when a stranger pulled her off the bike and put her in his truck. A neighbor heard Amber scream and looked in time to see the man pull her into the front seat of the truck. The neighbor immediately called the police and gave them a description of the man and the truck he was driving. The local news and radio stations aired the kidnapping during their normal broadcasts. Tragically, four

days later, Amber's body was found in a drainage ditch four miles away from home. No arrests have been made.

This case outraged the community, and area residents urged the local news and radio stations to begin issuing special alerts, similar to weather alerts, when a child is reported missing. The following year, through a partnership with local law enforcement and broadcasters, the AMBER (America's Missing Broadcast Emergency Response) Alert plan was put into place. Then in 2003, President Bush signed the PROTECT Act, making the AMBER Alert program a national initiative.

CRITERIA FOR ACTIVATION

The criteria that must be met before an AMBER Alert can be activated are: 1) Law enforcement must confirm that the child has been abducted; 2) law enforcement believes the circumstances surrounding the abduction indicate that the child is in danger of serious bodily harm or death; 3) there is enough descriptive information about the child, abductor and/or suspect's vehicle to believe an immediate broadcast alert will help; 4) the abducted child is 17 years old or younger (check your state policy); and 5) the child's name and other critical data elements are entered into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) system (check your state policy).

Every state has an AMBER Alert contact who will define its AMBER Alert plan. The plan will consist at a minimum of the criteria that must be met and the identity of the state division responsible for disseminating the information to the primary radio and/or television stations.

Once the criteria are met, the state AMBER Alert coordinator will put together all the information that is available, including a description of the missing child and vehicle (if applicable), pictures (an absolute must-have for a speedy recovery) and a description of the abductor. That information is faxed to the primary radio and/or television stations. The primary station(s) sends that information to local stations through the Emergency Alert System (EAS). The local participating radio stations interrupt programming to broadcast the alert, and local participating television stations run a "crawl" at the bottom of the screen with a photograph, if available. Some states have also incorporated electronic highway billboards. Billboards typically used to disseminate traffic information to drivers can also be used to disseminate information about an abducted child. In addition, AMBER Alerts can be sent to more than 190 million individuals via cellular phones.

The AMBER Alert plan uses the EAS, formerly known as the Emergency Broadcasting System, to deliver information about child abductions to radio and television stations. The EAS was created in 1994 by the FCC to replace the Emergency Broadcasting System that was originally created to allow the

Objectives

- The student will gain knowledge of the history and purpose of the AMBER Alert plan.
- The student will be able to identify the criteria needed to start the process for an AMBER Alert.
- The student will have knowledge of the alert system used to activate the AMBER Alert.

GONE MISSING

president to address the American people in the event of a national emergency.

AMBER ALERT IN ACTION

The following two true stories illustrate outcomes before and after the AMBER Alert plan was put in place. The first story, which occurred before AMBER Alert plans were implemented, is one you may be familiar with.

On July 27, 1981, six-year-old Adam Walsh and his mother Revé went to a department store about a mile away from their home to shop for lamps. When they

entered the store, Adam saw several children playing video games on a television monitor and asked if he could stay to play. His mother let him stay and went to the lamp department, about 75 feet away. Because the lamp she wanted was not in stock, she returned quickly, less than 10 minutes later, but couldn't find Adam. After she had looked for Adam on her own for two hours, someone finally called the local police department. By the end of that week, thousands of flyers with Adam's photograph had been distributed in the local area. Sixteen days after Adam

disappeared from the store, his remains were found and identified.

This next true story occurred after the AMBER Alert plan was put into place.

In March 1999, nine-year old Fleisha Moore and a friend were walking home when a man driving a truck pulled into the parking lot just ahead of them. The driver got out and asked the girls if they had seen a bunch of kittens in a nearby field. After Fleisha stepped forward to take a closer look, the man grabbed her, put her in the truck and sped off. Luckily her friend was able to give police a

'CHILD ABDUCTED AT GUNPOINT'

A First-Person Account BY DIANA SCOTT

New Year's Eve 2004 my shift started at 1400 HRS. Like any other shift on a holiday, I expected to be busy, but nothing could have prepared us for exactly how busy and how taxed our resources would become. At 1558 HRS we received a frantic 9-1-1 call indicating that an eight-month-old child had been abducted at gunpoint. The telecommunicator quickly gathered all the information: suspect name, description, vehicle information, victim description, direction of travel, etc. Patrol officers were immediately dispatched to the scene, along with a patrol supervisor. Other patrol officers were dispatched to the area to look for the suspect.

AN AMBER ALERT SITUATION

Up until that day I had little knowledge of how the AMBER Alert program worked. I had heard about it in the news and even seen a few broadcasts on TV. I knew we had a manual on the procedure, but until that day I had looked at it only briefly. The patrol supervisor called me, and together we decided this was probably an AMBER Alert situation. I immediately got the manual from the drawer and started to complete the Indiana AMBER Alert Request Form. That's when I learned that the Indiana State Police (ISP) must make the determination of whether or not a case meets the requirements for an AMBER Alert and that ISP is actually the agency that activates the AMBER Alert.

By this time, the patrol supervisor had returned to station with the rest of the information needed to finish the AMBER Alert request and to get the child's information entered into NCIC/IDACS as an abducted child. We faxed our request to ISP.

The officer in charge at ISP headquarters immediately contacted us. He informed us that we needed to obtain a picture of the child that would need to be scanned and e-mailed to his attention before the AMBER Alert could be issued. Because it was a holiday, no one on duty had access to a scanner. So we started calling personnel at home. We reached a detective who was on call and could obtain the photo and the public information officer who had access to a scanner.

To make a long story short, it took us almost three hours from the original time of dispatch until the AMBER Alert was actually issued. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, "Seventy-

four percent of children who are kidnapped and later found murdered are killed within the first three hours after being taken." We had failed to meet this critical mark.

Once the alert was issued, the onslaught of other issues we had not considered began. We had to give out a phone number where tips could be forwarded; we gave them the number into the dispatch center. Immediately, any numbers ringing into the 800 AMBER line are forwarded to the agency in charge. Dispatchers were taking tips and trying to determine which were credible and in need of follow up. They were receiving requests from local and national media for photos of the child, as well as information on the abduction. The Center for Missing and Exploited Children had a packet of information it needed to have completed and immediately faxed to it. These additional duties were all taken on by our dispatchers, who had little training in these areas, in addition to the normal chaos of New Year's Eve. We were overwhelmed.

GOOD NEWS

Thank goodness our story has a happy ending. The child was located in a nearby city unharmed.

This incident could have ended very differently, and I am ashamed to say that as a department we would have had some serious questions to answer. To say we were caught unprepared would be an understatement. This opened our eyes to the need to become educated and more prepared as a department. The positive operational outcome of this story is that we immediately formed a committee of patrol and investigative officers, as well as dispatchers and public information officers, to look into formation of an Amber Alert Plan that would be easier to understand and carry out. An Amber Alert Coordinator was named, and team members were assigned. Hopefully, we never have that frantic 9-1-1 call again of a child abducted at gunpoint, but if and when we do, we are now prepared and able to handle what lies ahead.

DIANA SCOTT is assistant director of communications for the South Bend (Ind.) Police and Fire Communications Center.

description of the abductor and the truck he was driving.

An AMBER Alert was immediately activated with a description of Fleisha, the abductor and his red Chevy truck with tinted windows and a yellow compressor on the back. Radio stations across the region instantly filled the airwaves with urgent alerts about the crime.

About five hours after the abduction, several motorists called to report a child wandering along Interstate 45, about 60 miles from Dallas. It was Fleisha. Within 10 minutes, she was rescued.

Fleisha told police that she remembered the man was listening to the radio when he pulled over and ordered her to get out. At the time, an AMBER Alert was put out every 15 minutes over 32 radio stations in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. Fleisha is back home with her family. Within hours after Fleisha was located, her abductor was arrested based on the description that Fleisha's friend had given them.

These are similar stories but with very different outcomes. Why? Because the AMBER Alert plan was available at the time of the second incident. This year alone more than 30 abducted children have been saved by using the AMBER Alert plan.

An AMBER Alert plan:

- Is a powerful law enforcement tool;
- Is in the public's interest;
- Allows for a quick response to serious abductions;
- Allows broadcasters to contribute to the community by issuing the alerts;
- Helps law enforcement either solve the case or locate witnesses;
- Involves the whole community in the recovery;
- Involves the whole community in the capture of the perpetrator;
- Acts as a deterrent for this type of crime;
- Builds a relationship among law enforcement, broadcasters and the community;
- Doesn't cost anything to implement; and
- Saves lives.

Remember, the law has changed. We don't have to wait 24 hours before a missing persons report can be made. The

LEARN MORE ABOUT YOUR STATE'S AMBER ALERT PROGRAM

Visit the Web sites below and log onto www.apointl.com/services/publications/ for state-by-state contacts, activation steps, reporting information and more.

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|----------------------|---|
| Alabama | http://www.dps.state.al.us/public/abi/amber_plan.asp |
| Alaska | http://amberalert.alaska.gov/ |
| Arizona | http://www.azbroadcasters.org/AMBER.html |
| Arkansas | http://www.todaysthv.com/life/community/morgannick/default.aspx |
| California | http://www.chp.ca.gov/amber/amber-en.html |
| Colorado | http://www.cbi.state.co.us/mp/amber/amberlist.asp |
| Connecticut | http://www.state.ct.us/dps/Amber_Alert.htm |
| Delaware | http://governor.delaware.gov/news/2003/01january/011403%20-%20amber%20alert%20implementation.shtml |
| District of Columbia | http://www.washingtonamberalert.com/ |
| Florida | http://www.fdle.state.fl.us/AmberPlan/ |
| Georgia | http://alerts.gbi.georgia.gov/02/gbi/alerts/0,2614,67865199,00.html |
| Hawaii | http://www.honolulu.dpd.org/community/maile.htm |
| Idaho | http://www.idahoamberalert.com/resources.php |
| Illinois | http://www.isp.state.il.us/crime/amber.htm |
| Indiana | http://amberalertindiana.com/ |
| Iowa | http://www.iowaamberalert.org/ |
| Kansas | http://www.ksamber.org |
| Kentucky | http://kyem.dma.ky.gov/amberpage/amberalert.html |
| Louisiana | http://www.lsp.org/amber.html |
| Maine | http://www.maine.gov/portal/CAS/index.shtml |
| Maryland | http://www.mdsp.org/ |
| Massachusetts | http://www.masschiefs.org/hottopics/hot_aalert.html |
| Michigan | http://www.michmab.com/amberalert.html |
| Minnesota | http://www.dps.state.mn.us/mcan/AmberAlert/index.htm |
| Mississippi | http://www.dps.state.ms.us/dps/dps.nsf/divpages/ci3amber?OpenDocument |
| Missouri | http://www.dps.mo.gov/home/AmberAlert.htm |
| Montana | http://doj.mt.gov/enforcement/missingpersonclearinghouse.asp |
| Nebraska | http://www.nsp.state.ne.us/findfile.asp?id2=183 |
| Nevada | http://amberalert.nv.gov/ |
| New Hampshire | No information available |
| New Jersey | http://www.njsp.org/amber/ |
| New Mexico | http://www.dps.nm.org/amberAlert/index.php |
| New York | http://criminaljustice.state.ny.us/missing/aware/amber.htm |
| North Carolina | http://www.nccrimecontrol.org/index2.cfm?a=000003,000005,000081,000103 |
| North Dakota | http://www.nd.gov/amber/ |
| Ohio | http://www.ohioamberplan.org/ |
| Oklahoma | http://www.oklahomacounty.org/sheriff/amberalert/ |
| Oregon | http://www.oregonamberalert.com/eas.php |
| Pennsylvania | http://www.amber.state.pa.us/amber/site/default.asp |
| Rhode Island | http://www.risp.state.ri.us/amberalert/ |
| South Carolina | http://www.sled.sc.gov/ |
| South Dakota | http://www.state.sd.us/amberalert/ |
| Tennessee | http://www.tbi.state.tn.us/Cid/AmberAlert/AmberAlert2.htm |
| Texas | http://www.governor.state.tx.us/divisions/press/initiatives/amber |
| Utah | http://www.attygen.state.ut.us/AL/amberalert.htm |
| Vermont | http://www.dps.state.vt.us/vtsp/amber/ |
| Virginia | http://www.vaamberalert.com/index.htm |
| Washington | http://www.wa.gov/wsdp/amber/default.htm |
| West Virginia | http://www.wvstatepolice.com/amber.htm |
| Wisconsin | http://www.amberalertwisconsin.org |
| Wyoming | http://attorneygeneral.state.wy.us/dci/amberalert/amberalert.html |

~ **One hundred abducted children are murdered each year, & 74% of those murders are committed within the first three hours following the abduction.**

sooner a report is made the better the chances of finding the person. Not all missing persons reports will activate the AMBER Alert plan. Check your agency's policies and procedures for the proper way to handle a missing persons report in your jurisdiction. Educate your community on child safe-practices.

A COMPLEMENTARY PROGRAM

Ten years after the first AMBER Alert plan was implemented, all 50 states have implemented a statewide AMBER Alert plan and

more than 241 children have been rescued as a result. (For details about each state's plan, see sidebar, p. 95, and visit www.apcointl.org.) But because an AMBER Alert is not appropriate for every missing child report, a broader plan was necessary.

In February 2004, 11-year old Carlie Brucia in Sarasota, Fla., was tragically abducted. In response to this tragedy, members of the Orlando Regional Operations Center working on the case determined that they needed trained experts in the field of child abduction investigation and response. These experts needed to be able to respond to an abduction immediately, assist the lead local law enforcement agency and bring additional regional resources to the recovery effort. And because of this, Child Abduction Response Teams (CARTs) were born.

CARTs are formed locally and regionally by each state. Typically, the members are law enforcement investigators, forensic experts, AMBER Alert coordinators, state

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▶ SOURCES ~

- National Center for Missing & Exploited Children: www.missingkids.com
- KlaasKids Foundation: www.klaaskids.org
- Child Abduction Response Team (CART): www.amberalert.gov

and local officials, search and rescue professionals, crime intelligence analysts, victim service providers and other inter-agency resources. The Department of Justice provides regional training to CART teams throughout the United States.

CART complements the AMBER Alert plan because it can be used for all missing children cases and can be deployed as part of an AMBER Alert or when a child is abducted or missing but the abduction/disappearance does not meet the

AMBER Alert criteria. CART has been activated more than 15 times and with 12 children recovered.

~ This year alone more than 30 abducted children have been saved by using the AMBER Alert plan.

LAST WORD

Back in the 1970s, in Detroit, there were several child abductions. The abductor(s) would entice children to get in the vehicles by offering them candy. Schoolchildren were required to walk to and from school at that time, and school officials tried very hard to educate the children on the danger of getting in a vehicle with a stranger.

One snowy afternoon in December 1977, a group of children was walking home from school when a stranger pulled to the side of the road where the children were walking. The stranger told the children he had some candy in his car and asked if they wanted any. The group of children took off running—except for one child who could not climb up the hill of snow in front of her. The strange man realized that this child was alone and started walking toward her. The child ran in the other direction, stopped at a house and pounded on the door. The stranger continued coming toward the child until someone opened the door.

That child is alive today because of the education and information that was shared with her through her family and school. Now that child is writing this article for you. I share my story to emphasize that this does not just happen to other people; it can happen close to home. I am forever grateful to those school officials who took the time to be educated themselves and then pass that information on to us. As a telecommunicator, you are like the school officials; take the time to become educated on the AMBER Alert plan so you can use your knowledge to help a missing child.

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SHEILA HANNA-WILES is training coordinator for Laurens County, S.C., and an adjunct instructor for APCO International. Contact her via e-mail at sphanna@wctel.net.

▶ CDE #22397 EXAM: GONE MISSING ~

1. **The emergency responder to first start the process of an AMBER Alert is:**
 - a. The police officer
 - b. The telecommunicator
 - c. The Missing Children's Network
 - d. The state AMBER Alert contact

2. **Which of the following is not a criterion for an AMBER Alert?**
 - a. Law enforcement must confirm that the child has been abducted.
 - b. Law enforcement believes the circumstances surrounding the abduction indicate that the child is in danger of serious bodily harm or death.
 - c. A description of the child, abductor or vehicle is not necessary.
 - d. The child's name and other critical data elements are entered into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) system.

3. **The person/entity required to put together all available information and fax it to the primary radio/television station is:**
 - a. The telecommunicator
 - b. The parents
 - c. The state AMBER Alert coordinator
 - d. The police officer who took the report

4. **How many children have been saved this year alone by using the AMBER Alert Plan?**
 - a. 5
 - b. 10
 - c. 20
 - d. 30 or more

5. **List the four primary classifications of missing children:**
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____
 - d. _____

6. **More than 300 children abducted by non-family members annually are murdered.**
 - a. True
 - b. False

7. **To implement the AMBER Alert system is very expensive.**
 - a. True
 - b. False

8. **All missing persons reports can activate the AMBER Alert plan.**
 - a. True
 - b. False

9. **Before the AMBER Alert plan can be activated, there must be at least a 24-hour waiting period to make sure the missing child does not return.**
 - a. True
 - b. False

10. **To properly execute the AMBER Alert plan, a telecommunicator must be educated on the process and follow policy and procedure.**
 - a. True
 - b. False

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