

# AMBER Alert

## Best Practices Guide for Broadcasters and Other Media Outlets



*Bringing Abducted  
Children Home*



**AMBER  
ALERT**

America's Missing:  
Broadcast Emergency Response

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**April 2005**

NCJ 208481

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**S**eventy-four percent of children who are kidnapped and later found murdered are killed within the first three hours after being taken, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. Time is critical if abducted children are to be successfully recovered. Early involvement of the media in a child abduction case can make the difference between unthinkable tragedy and joyous reunification.

During missing child incidents, the media serve as the conduit between law enforcement officials and the public in making sure timely and accurate information quickly reaches the intended public audience. Broadcast media are among the first responders—the vehicle that transmits the early, rapid AMBER (America’s Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response) Alerts giving citizens the basic information that will enable them to be involved in the search for an abducted child.

The critical role played by broadcast journalists in an early response does not minimize the need for other media during AMBER Alert incidents. Cable companies, newspapers, and specialty publications also play a vital role in reaching all segments of the public. AMBER Alerts solicit the public’s eyes and ears, and all media, regardless of audience or geographical reach, can help enlist the public’s participation when

*The concept for AMBER Alert is simple and effective: Law enforcement and the media working together to alert the public and effect the quick, safe recovery of abducted children.*

a child is missing or abducted. Consequently, all forms of media are important and needed.

## **Brief History of AMBER Alert**



The idea for an early warning system was conceived in 1996 as a memorial to nine-year-old Amber Hagerman, who was kidnapped while riding her bicycle in Arlington, Texas, and later brutally murdered. Dallas area broadcasters came up with the idea of using Emergency Alert System (EAS) equipment to rapidly relay child abduction information. Broadcasters approached local law enforcement with the concept, and America’s first AMBER Alert program was born. The idea was simple: When police notified the media that a child abduction had taken place, viewers and the listening public would be



notified through broadcast announcements with as much information as possible to enable the public to provide the extra eyes and ears that would increase the likelihood that a child abductor could be caught before those first three critical hours had elapsed.

The early warning concept, now called AMBER Alert, quickly spread to other communities and states. In 2002, President George W. Bush directed the U.S. Department of Justice to help every state set up its own AMBER plan. This *Best Practices Guide for Broadcasters and Other Media Outlets* is designed to help state, regional, and local programs develop and improve their plans and to promote consistency among all programs.

This guide is based on hours of research, correspondence, and discussion with state, regional, and local AMBER Alert coordinators and their media partners, who talked openly about their experiences and volunteered the content of their plans so that others could benefit. It presents the combined wisdom of journalists and coordinators working on the front line of the AMBER programs, who understand that no two communities or AMBER Alert programs are identical, but the goals are nevertheless the same: to create a national network of

AMBER Alert plans that will work together for the good of the children.

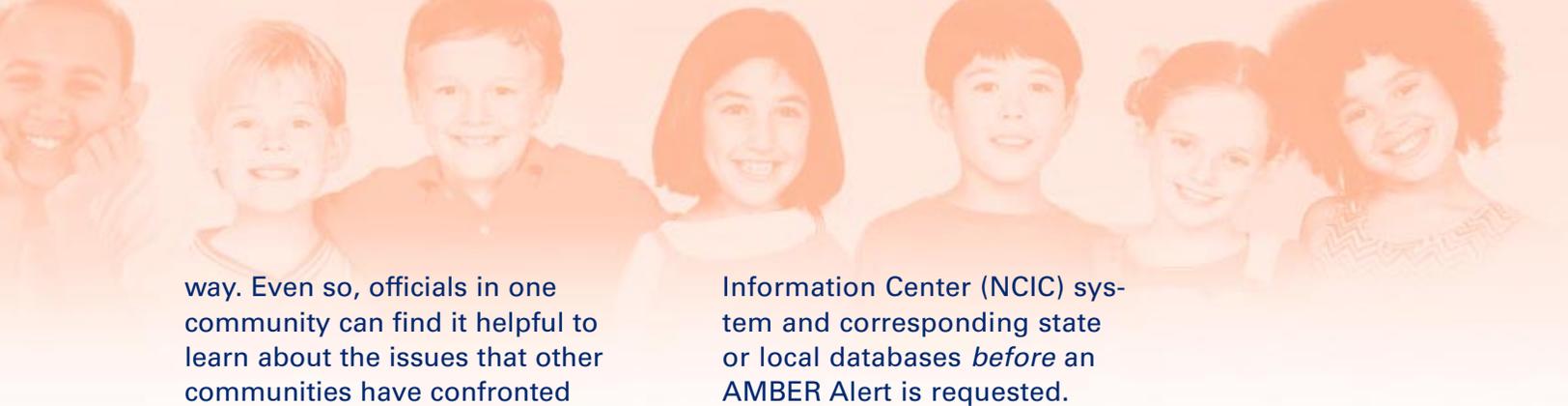
## Need for a Partnership

AMBER Alert's success is tied directly to the quality of the partnership established among law enforcement agencies, broadcast and other media outlets, departments of transportation, state and federal officials, and various civic and political leaders. Each partner is important, and each has a unique role to play. Similarly, each partnership has its unique characteristics based on the community in which it was created, yet each forms an essential link in the larger fabric of the nation's AMBER Alert program.

At the most basic level, partners need to understand their exact responsibilities in their community's AMBER Alert recovery plan. Partners can avoid duplication of effort if they understand the exact responsibilities of their colleagues as well.

## Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs)

The process of creating a local, state, or regional AMBER Alert plan is complex, and no two plans will evolve in exactly the same



way. Even so, officials in one community can find it helpful to learn about the issues that other communities have confronted and the solutions they found to resolve them. Some elements are common to all plans, and a clear, precise, and thorough definition of each partner's roles and responsibilities is one such element. To ensure a smoothly running program, potential legal issues or concerns should be explored and resolved in advance, if at all possible. A memorandum of understanding, or MOU, can form the basis for long-term agreement on roles and responsibilities before a final AMBER Alert plan is enacted. AMBER coordinators and their partners agree that, at a minimum, an MOU should detail the following:

- ◆ Specific roles of all the partners, including law enforcement agencies, broadcast and other media outlets, departments of transportation, various governmental organizations, nonprofit agencies, and other organizations with a child welfare focus.
- ◆ A requirement that law enforcement confirm that an abduction has taken place and that the risk of harm to the child is significant.
- ◆ Criteria for ensuring that key information has been entered into the National Crime

Information Center (NCIC) system and corresponding state or local databases *before* an AMBER Alert is requested.

- ◆ Criteria for activation of an AMBER Alert, including the age of the child and other critical information.
- ◆ Confidential systems and codes for use by law enforcement and broadcasters in activating an AMBER Alert.
- ◆ A system for disseminating Alerts, with regular tests to ensure the system's integrity.
- ◆ Appropriate wording to be used in disseminating an AMBER Alert to the public.
- ◆ Procedures for determining the frequency of broadcast Alerts, how long the Alerts should continue, and when and how Alerts should be deactivated.
- ◆ Procedures for determining the kind of Alert to be used, such as an EAS activation, a "crawl" at the bottom of a television screen, or a news announcement.
- ◆ The role of secondary media outlets, such as newspapers and other print media.
- ◆ The role of other secondary outlets, such as taxi companies, public transportation systems, and cable or power companies.



- ◆ The use of road signs, if available, and the wording to be used to tie the information back to broadcast Alerts.
- ◆ A mechanism for “all-clear” notifications.
- ◆ Does the plan need to be changed in any way in the wake of the Alert activation?

These are just some of the issues that should be discussed during the After-Action review to ensure that the AMBER Alert program is operating as specified in the MOU and agreed on by partner agencies and organizations.

## After-Action Reports

AMBER coordinators and their partners identified a second key element common to effective plans: a formal process evaluation following every Alert activation to assess process issues, including the quality of communication and technology. The best plans require that a follow-up meeting of key partners be scheduled after every Alert activation to discuss these questions:

- ◆ How successful was the Alert activation process? What worked well? What needs attention?
- ◆ How effectively did the equipment function?
- ◆ Did any expected problems arise during the Alert process, and what was done to resolve them?
- ◆ Did any expected gaps surface during the Alert—such as the need for additional training, equipment, or other technology requirements—that need to be addressed?

## Consensus of Broadcast Media

Media representatives who assisted in the development of this guide say that broadcasters who agree to provide immediate response during AMBER Alerts need a reasonable expectation that their partner agencies will fulfill all of their responsibilities in accordance with the activation plan. Some of these responsibilities can be detailed in MOU agreements.

Confidence in the AMBER Alert system will be ensured if everyone in the partnership agrees to the following:

- ◆ Law enforcement will request an EAS activation to alert the public only when all previously established criteria have been met.
- ◆ Law enforcement officials will provide complete, thorough information that is not legally



prohibited and does not jeopardize the integrity of an investigation.

- ◆ Law enforcement officials will recognize broadcasters' responsibility to provide the public with accurate, thorough information and to question any and all speculative reports as part of their professional duty.
- ◆ Law enforcement officials will quickly terminate an AMBER Alert when the threat is no longer imminent or apparent.
- ◆ Department of Transportation officials will provide timely information on road signs and will direct drivers to tune in to other sources for more detailed information.
- ◆ News staff at other broadcast stations, cable outlets, and newspapers will be able to obtain the same immediate information for dissemination purposes.
- ◆ The system for immediate, simultaneous dissemination (be it EAS, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, phone, fax, e-mail, or some combination of these) will be detailed in the MOU.
- ◆ The AMBER Alert message will include a phone number for the public to call.
- ◆ Law enforcement and other authorities, such as 911 centers, will provide a method for handling the tips and inquiries called in to the phone number once an AMBER Alert has been activated.
- ◆ EAS activation will protect the integrity of the AMBER Alert system by preventing false or other misleading transmission of information to the media that would result in the public becoming desensitized or even misled. The system for protection should include special codes and privileged activation transmissions among plan partners.
- ◆ Activation of an AMBER Alert over the EAS will not prevent news organizations, including stations airing AMBER Alerts, from using Alert information for legitimate news purposes.
- ◆ Information gleaned by legitimate news operations but not provided in the AMBER Alert announcement will be disseminated to the public in normal news reports. Nothing will be added to the official EAS AMBER Alert message.
- ◆ Law enforcement will establish procedures for making information available to the following entities *before* issuing an Alert: media outlets; other



law enforcement agencies such as the FBI (NCIC), National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC), and state clearinghouses; and secondary distributors.

- ◆ Law enforcement agencies and broadcasters will agree to make equipment and personnel available for periodic tests of the system used for broadcasting the Alert.

## Verification of Information

The media understands that AMBER Alert situations are fluid and will change minute by minute. Therefore, the media has a right to expect law enforcement officials to be accessible and provide a method for reporters to verify information gathered during normal newsroom operations. Law enforcement will find it counterproductive to request an AMBER Alert if no provision is made to communicate with reporters who have legitimate news questions or even information obtained independently.

A mechanism should be in place for reporters to communicate to law enforcement any unexpected needs that could arise once an AMBER Alert has been requested. MOU agreements must be flexible enough to address issues that arise.

## Content of Message

By their very nature, AMBER Alert messages must be concise and to the point. They also must be immediately understood, easily assimilated, and quickly disseminated.

Some communities, regions, and target audiences are better approached at a particular time of day or in a particular manner in order to maximize the effectiveness of the message. Who better than local broadcast media understand the particular needs of their target audience?

## The Message

Broadcasters understand that the content of the AMBER Alert message will have a direct impact on the effectiveness of the Alert. Except under extraordinary circumstances, an AMBER Alert message should be no longer than one to four sentences, using the fewest words possible without compromising clarity.

Ideally, the message should contain as many of the following elements as possible:

- ◆ Specific information about the day, time, and location of the incident and other details if available.



- ◆ The name, age, and sex of the abducted child.
  - ◆ A physical description of the abducted child (e.g., height, weight, birthmarks, hair color, eye color, clothing, and other physical information).
  - ◆ The name, age, and sex of the suspect.
  - ◆ A physical description of the suspect (e.g., height, weight, birthmarks, hair color, eye color, clothing, and other physical information).
  - ◆ Confirmation (if applicable) that the suspect is listed on a state sex offender registry.
  - ◆ A description of the suspect's vehicle (if applicable), including make, model, color, and year.
  - ◆ The license tag number of the suspect's vehicle, including state of issuance.
  - ◆ Toll-free telephone numbers and e-mail addresses for the public to use to contact authorities if the suspect or child is spotted.
- ◆ Other transportation methods, such as taxi, bus, train, or airplane, that the suspect may use.
  - ◆ The town, community, or state where the suspect and abducted child may be traveling.
  - ◆ Confirmation that law enforcement considers the child to be in imminent danger.
  - ◆ Reasons why law enforcement considers the child to be in danger.
  - ◆ Reasons why law enforcement thinks the suspect is traveling to a particular destination or using a particular route.

In addition, the following information may be helpful to include:

- ◆ Roads and highways that the suspect might use.

## Sensitivity to the Audience

Targeting key audiences is an important aspect of an AMBER Alert. The goal is to notify the people who will most likely be in a position to use the information to aid in the child's recovery.

Broadcast media representatives understand the power of words and the consequences of their indiscriminate use. Consequently, AMBER Alert messages must be carefully constructed to avoid using any word or phrase that might possibly alienate someone who might otherwise help. Particular care should be given to any mention of the following:



- ◆ Race or nationality (unless pertinent to a physical description).
- ◆ Physical or mental disabilities (unless pertinent to a physical description).
- ◆ Sexual preference (except where applicable, such as being listed on a state sex offender registry).
- ◆ Political affiliation.
- ◆ Religious preference.
- ◆ Other sensitive information that has no bearing on locating an abducted child.

## Frequency of Message

The frequency of an AMBER Alert issued through EAS and other broadcast venues is a critical component of the AMBER Alert plan. Broadcast media representatives sometimes wrestle with the issue of how frequently an AMBER Alert message should be broadcast. AMBER Alert coordinators should work closely with the primary, cable, and secondary broadcasters in their area to establish a clear plan of operation for how quickly and how often the primary alerting station will activate the EAS for an AMBER Alert message. These decisions should be delineated in formal

MOUs or other agreements before the AMBER Alert plan is put in place.

The following are some guidelines for frequency and content of AMBER Alerts:

- ◆ Primary stations should determine the best procedures for providing updated information for further EAS activation or crawl until the law enforcement agency terminates the Alert.
- ◆ The initial activation by the local primary station will give every media outlet information about the abduction. Local media outlets, working with their AMBER Alert coordinator, can determine if and how they will participate, whether they will interrupt all programs with the initial AMBER Alert message, delay the AMBER Alert message until the next break, or relay the information through another method such as a television crawl or newsbreak.
- ◆ The television message can take the form of an audio announcement and/or an onscreen visual announcement.
- ◆ Television broadcasters can choose to include a repetitive crawling message at the bottom of the screen or do cut-ins with news anchors or other personnel.



- ◆ Any message should include a phone number for the public to call. In audio reports, the phone number should be repeated at least twice during each announcement.

## Other Considerations

The broadcast media voluntarily provide their valuable air time to inform the public that a child has been abducted with the idea that such information is in the best interest of the community. In exchange for this assistance, broadcasters can reasonably expect that:

- ◆ An Alert will be terminated as soon as it has been determined that the announcement is no longer needed.
- ◆ An Alert will be issued based only on previously agreed-on criteria.
- ◆ Contact between broadcasters and law enforcement officials will be continuous.
- ◆ Law enforcement will be continuously accessible to broadcasters.

- ◆ Law enforcement will respect the decision of broadcasters not to air, or to delay airing, AMBER Alerts because of factors such as the lack of proximity of the AMBER event to the station, the action of other stations in the market airing the Alert, and programming concerns (e.g., sensitivity to children who may be watching or listening; contractual obligations requiring the station to present certain programs, such as sports, uninterrupted; or staff availability).

- ◆ The media will do its best to accommodate law enforcement requests for issuing AMBER Alerts, and the media and law enforcement will work out ways to air Alerts that do not conflict with contractual obligations (by using a crawl at the bottom of the screen, for example).

- ◆ The Federal Communications Commission requires each station to retain decisionmaking authority over the material it airs.

Open lines of communication between broadcasters and law enforcement officials are crucial. The safe return of children must remain the paramount concern and focus.



## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

**For more information about the AMBER Alert program, including training, technical assistance, and laws, visit the U.S. Department of Justice Web site at:**

**[www.AMBERALERT.gov](http://www.AMBERALERT.gov)**

**To report an emergency situation or to provide information about a missing or exploited child, call 911 to notify your local police, or call**

**800-THE-LOST (800-843-5678)**

**To report information about child pornography, child molestation, child prostitution, and the online enticement of children, log on to the CyberTipline at:**

**[www.cybertipline.com](http://www.cybertipline.com)**

**For more information on missing and exploited children, visit the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) at:**

**[www.missingkids.com](http://www.missingkids.com)**

**U.S. Department of Justice**  
Office of Justice Programs  
*Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention*



*Washington, DC 20531*

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