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AMBER ALERT PLANS

With several well-publicized kidnappings of children in the last few months, Amber Alerts are much in the news. Amber Alerts are named for Amber Hagerman, a nine-year old from Arlington, Texas, who was kidnapped and murdered in 1996. "AMBER" is also an acronym for "America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response". Eighteen states and 32 other jurisdictions have established Amber Plans so far. In Wisconsin, Green Bay and Madison have established Amber Plans and the state is establishing a statewide plan.

BACKGROUND

One of the major reasons for implementing Amber Plans is the need for rapid response to child abductions. One study found that almost three-quarters of children abducted by nonfamily members are killed within three hours. To achieve the kind of response necessary to save children, Amber Alert systems capitalize on the existing Emergency Alert System (EAS). This system, successor to the Emergency Broadcast System, was designed to provide information on emergency simulations like tornados and hurricanes, but has been adapted to disseminate information on abducted children to news outlets rapidly. The National Center for Missing Children credits Amber Alerts with saving the lives of 30 children.

PLAN ELEMENTS

While there are differences among programs, most Amber Plans are similar. Nearly all are cooperative agreements involving several state or local agencies, news media, and private organizations. Plans almost always include state or local police or the state justice department. Existing missing children offices may be included and, where the system uses automated highway signs, transportation officials are involved. In most cases, new legislation has not been required. The plans are an addition to an existing program and do not usually involve extensive new financing.

Because the value of any emergency alert system can be reduced if the system is overused, plans usually have fairly strict guidelines. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children suggests three criteria that should be met before an alert is activated:

- law enforcement confirms a child has been abducted;
- law enforcement believes the circumstances surrounding the abduction indicate that the child is in danger of serious bodily harm or death;
- there is enough descriptive information about the child, abductor, and/or suspect's vehicle to believe an immediate broadcast alert will help.

Some jurisdictions add other criteria. Some states require the child be under 18, some make it under 16. Some states include provision for using the alert for a victim who has a

proven mental or physical disability. Children abducted by family members and runaways are excluded in some states since they are not ordinarily at immediate risk.

Amber Alerts are usually triggered by reporting a child missing to local police. Police then apply that jurisdiction's criteria. If the case meets the criteria, information is collected for distribution to media outlets and decisions are made on how widely to broadcast the alert. Activation can be local, regional, or statewide. The EAS system usually involves initial distribution to media contacts who then disseminate the information to other television and radio stations.

PROBLEMS

Overuse of the alerts is already a concern. While rapid response is the keystone of the Amber idea, it is estimated that there are almost 2,000 children reported missing each day. The public will not respond if there are too many alerts, and there have already been instances where alerts proved to be false alarms. In one instance, a child was found asleep in a closet several hours later. Another turned out to be a runaway.

A few of the existing Amber Plans have been in operation long enough to provide some idea of the level of usage. The six-year old Dallas/Ft. Worth system has averaged about one alert a month over its existence. Florida has experienced about the same level of usage. Oklahoma, at the other extreme, has only been used about once a year.

WISCONSIN ACTION

The Wisconsin Department of Justice is working in cooperation with the Wisconsin Broadcasters Association to establish a statewide plan in Wisconsin. The plan's criteria are similar to those suggested by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and apply to children age 17 or younger. Criteria will be applied by local law enforcement officials and forwarded to the Dane County Communication Center for broadcast. The department expects the Wisconsin system to cost about \$65,000 to set up and upgrade equipment necessary to send out the alerts.

NATIONAL ACTION

While Amber Alerts work well at the local level, coordination at the federal level is beneficial. The Federal Communications Commission has recently added a new code to the system to specifically identify Amber Alerts, separate from the more general code used to identify civil emergencies like tornados. In September 2002, a bill was introduced in the U.S. Congress to provide for national coordination and matching funds to help states with training and electronic signs. Multistate coordination can be important where authorities have reason to believe an abductor may have crossed state lines.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

For further information on Amber Alerts, contact Susan Whitehorse, Department of Justice, Bureau of Criminal Investigations at (608) 267-2783.