

# Amber Alerts

*States use technology to combat child abduction*

BY CHAD KINSELLA

**O**n the morning of July 31, local police in Shelby County, Kentucky, were called to a motel. While there they learned that a 16-year-old girl had reportedly been abducted at gunpoint. Law enforcement officials immediately began to gather information, learning details about the kidnapped girl, the suspects, and the getaway vehicle. Shelby County police then called the Kentucky State Police and requested an Amber Alert, Kentucky's first since it was enacted in December 2002.

America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response – better known as Amber Alert – has been credited with saving more than 90 children nationwide.

Kentucky State Police immediately had the state's Department of Emergency Management activate the Amber Alert System. The department immediately sent out information about the abducted girl and the suspects to state news outlets. The information appeared on radio and television sta-

tions across the state. Even lottery tickets purchased at the time of the alert contained information about the victim and suspects. Within one hour after the alert was issued, the victim was located. She showed up on a stranger's doorstep in Louisville, and said, "I am the Amber Alert girl."

The victim later said that her captors took her to a Louisville residence, where three men held her in captivity. One of her captors turned on the television and saw a news broadcast describing the abductors and the girl. Two of the men fled on foot and the other ordered the girl into a car, drove her several blocks, and then told her to get out. All three suspects are now in custody and the victim told authorities that the Amber Alert System probably saved her life. "The system, although not completely without flaws, exceeded all expectations," said Lt. Lisa Rudzinski, head of Kentucky State Police community relations.

**A**merica's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response – better known as Amber Alert – has been credited with saving more than 90 children nationwide. The first Amber plan was created in 1996 in the Dallas, Texas area in response to the murder of 9-year-old Amber Hagerman, who was abducted while riding her bicycle. After this horrific event, community outcry turned into an innovative idea to help save kidnapped children. The Dallas/Fort Worth Association of Radio Managers teamed up with local law-enforcement agencies in northern Texas and developed what would become the first Amber Alert system in the nation. Since then, 92 other local, state and regional systems have been created.

Amber Alert success stories have also taken place recently in other states:

- In Michigan, a man posing as a good Samaritan while helping a grandmother in a store parking lot stole her car with her 3-



year-old granddaughter in it. Michigan State Police activated the Amber Alert and the girl was found the next morning, alone in the abandoned car.

- In Massachusetts, a husband notified police that his estranged wife came to his house to pick up their three children for a visit. Later, when she failed to return as scheduled, she called her husband and threatened to harm herself and the children. State Police issued an Amber Alert and about an hour later, a friend of the mother convinced her to release the children. The children were safely returned to their father.

- In California, two teenagers were kidnapped at gunpoint from a popular hilltop hangout. After state police activated the Amber Alert system, an animal control officer reported seeing the vehicle described by the alert. This tip allowed sheriff's deputies to corner the suspect on a dirt road and rescue the two girls, 12 hours after the alert was issued. Both victims told police that the alert saved their lives.

According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, Amber plans are voluntary partnerships between law enforcement agencies and broadcasters to activate an urgent bulletin in the most

serious child abduction cases. “Our research has shown that the first few hours are critical in the safe recovery of an abducted child,” said Assistant U.S. Attorney General Deborah Daniels, the National Amber coordinator, speaking at the Annual Meeting of the National Alliance of State Broadcasters Association. “Seventy four percent of children who are kidnapped and later found murdered are killed within the first three hours after being taken, so a quick response is vital in saving the life of an abducted child.”

Not every missing child case is eligible for an Amber Alert. There are critical thresholds that must be met to ensure that the alert is not overused. Each system has established criteria for the activation of their Amber Alert. Although no standard, adopted formula exists, The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children recommends that law enforcement officials should:

- confirm that a child has been abducted;
- believe the circumstances surrounding the abduction indicate that the child is in danger of serious bodily harm or death; and
- have enough information about the child and the abductors, plus a description of the vehicle used by the abductors.

If the case meets these three criteria, an Amber Alert may be issued and information released to the public. Using the Emergency Alert System, information is sent to primary radio and TV stations, which in turn send the information to other radio, television and cable stations. The information is then sent out through a break in radio broadcasting that announces the alert, a “crawl” or “ticker”

on television and cable television accompanied by a picture of the child. Many states are even using electronic highway signs to distribute the information.

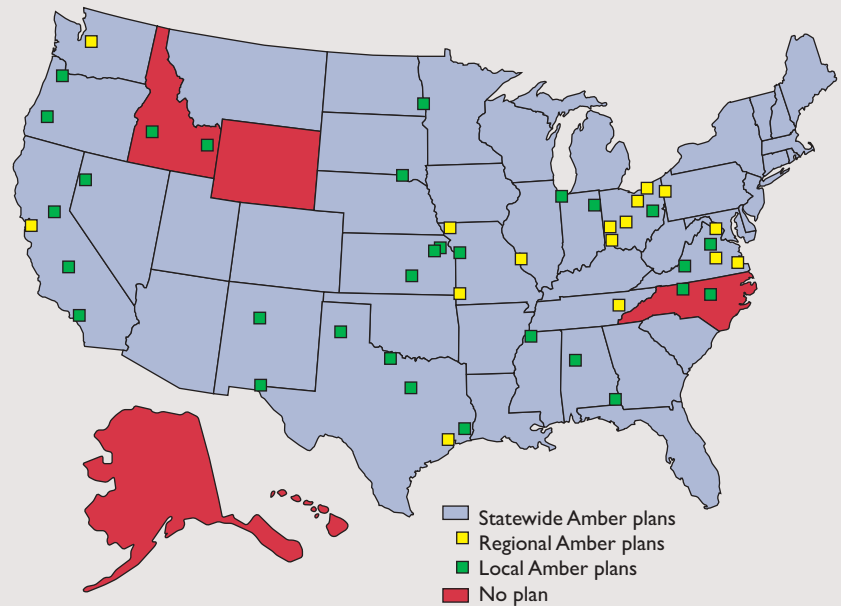
On April 30, President Bush signed into law the Prosecuting Remedies and Tools Against the Exploitation of Children Today Act, which established a national Amber Alert System. PROTECT also created the position of national Amber Alert coordinator and set aside more than \$25 million in 50 percent matching grant funds to be distributed to states by the U.S. Departments of Justice and Transportation to help with their Amber Alert plans.

Currently, of the 93 Amber Alert systems nationwide, 46 are statewide, 16 are regional, and 31 are local systems. There is also a National Advisory Board comprised of officials from the Transportation and Justice Departments, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, broadcasters and law enforcement officials.

Amber Plans showcase how multiple public and private agencies cooperating together can ensure child safety, how citizens in communities can play an active role in fighting crime, and how normal technology can be used to thwart criminals.

—Chad Kinsella is a public safety and justice policy analyst at The Council of State Governments.

## Amber plans America's Missing Broadcast Emergency Response



Source: National Center for Missing and Exploited Children

## Strategy for Amber coordination

According to the Justice Department's recently launched Amber Web site, National Coordinator Deborah Daniels and the National Advisory Board have collaborated to create a strategy to help supporting states and communities strengthen the AMBER alert system nationwide to help ensure abducted children will be recovered swiftly and safely. Activities include:

- determining the number of local, statewide and regional plans;
- comparing plan operations and Amber Alert criteria; and
- evaluating available technology.

They have also agreed to create a coordinated Amber system by:

- developing guidance on criteria for issuing an Amber Alert;
- establishing federal, state and local partnerships; and
- promoting technological compatibility among communication systems.

Also, they want to spread information about lessons learned by:

- working with law enforcement and broadcasters on missing children issues and the proper issuance of Amber Alerts;
- helping states and communities develop and enhance their Amber Alert Plans; and
- raising public awareness on how to protect children and prevent abductions.