

Introduction

California's AMBER Alert

Time is the enemy following a child abduction, and law enforcement's response must be immediate and focused. The geography of California offers many advantages to a child abductor, including the opportunity to quickly transport the victim across county, state, or international borders, or otherwise escape to areas where detection can be difficult. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, most children who were abducted and later murdered were killed within the first three hours of their abduction. In light of these facts, it is essential to child safety that a coordinated response take place within those precious hours immediately after an abduction occurs.



America's **Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response Alert**, or **AMBER Alert**, is a statewide innovative program that partners California's law enforcement community, media broadcasting agencies and the public in locating abducted children. The goal of AMBER Alert is to provide the public with immediate and up-to-date information about a child abduction via widespread media broadcasts and to solicit help from the public in the safe and swift return of the child. AMBER Alert is a key component of the California Child Safety Amber Network (CCSAN), a comprehensive child abduction response program administered by the California Highway Patrol (CHP).



One of the most important aspects of AMBER Alert is the partnerships formed between local law enforcement officials and media broadcasters, who work together to establish regional emergency response plans specific to each community's needs.

Background

The State's AMBER Alert is modeled after the *AMBER Plan*, which was developed in 1996 after nine-year old Amber Hagerman was abducted near her home in Arlington, Texas, and later found murdered. Communities throughout the nation have since adopted modified versions of the original AMBER Plan with great success. To date, these plans have been instrumental in the successful recovery of at least 20 children nationwide.

The concept of AMBER Alert was first introduced as a pilot program in California on a regional basis. This program, named the Child Abduction Regional Emergency (CARE) Alert, was implemented in 1999 in Orange County and in 2001 in the Sacramento area, encompassing several counties. In 2002, Assembly Bill 415 (Government Code section 8594) mandated that AMBER Alert Plans be implemented statewide and include specific notification protocols for all communities.



Overview

Under the AMBER Alert concept, law enforcement agencies employ the assistance of local radio and television stations to interrupt normal programming and request public assistance in locating children who have just been abducted. Emergency bulletins are relayed from law enforcement agencies to the media through the Emergency Alert System (EAS) and the Emergency Digital Information Service (EDIS). The EAS is a federal system used to alert the public of severe weather conditions and civil emergencies. The EDIS is a service provided by the Governor's Office of Emergency Services (OES) that allows government agencies to widely distribute newswire-style bulletins, as well as images and audio files.



How does an AMBER Alert activation work?

When a law enforcement agency receives a report of a child abduction, it first confirms that the case meets specific criteria for an AMBER Alert activation. The agency then initiates either a regional, multi-regional or statewide EAS alert. For a multi-regional or statewide alert, the agency contacts the CHP's Emergency Notification and Tactical Alert Center (ENTAC), which will transmit a bulletin-type message to the appropriate local primary (LP-1) radio stations. The LP-1 stations relay the message to other media outlets within the designated regions. When accepted by media outlets, the message pre-empts local programming and is preceded and concluded with distinctive tones. For a more localized, regional alert, the law enforcement agency may send the message directly to its designated LP-1 station, which is pre-assigned by the Local Emergency Communications Committee (LECC), or contact ENTAC for assistance in coordinating this process.



While the law only requires activation of the EAS in child abduction cases meeting the AMBER Alert criteria, law enforcement agencies should also utilize EDIS and other available emergency notification systems to help disseminate urgent information to the public. To use EDIS, the investigating agency transmits a Be-On-the-Look-Out (BOLO) Administrative Message to all California law enforcement agencies via the California Law Enforcement Telecommunications System (CLETS), using a specified format. This message is automatically relayed through EDIS to media outlets via text pager, e-mail, and other text forwarding systems. The media decides if, and in what priority, the message should be broadcast. The public is also advised to call the investigating agency with any helpful information.

As soon as photos or sketches are available, the investigating agency creates a poster on the Internet by uploading the images and entering pertinent data, using a template on the OES EDIS Web site. As soon as the poster is created, California law enforcement agencies and the media are notified via CLETS and EDIS, respectively. The poster may be downloaded as needed.

It is important to remember that AMBER Alert is effective only if activated when appropriate. If AMBER Alert is misused or employed in cases that do not meet the specified criteria, its credibility and integrity can be diminished.



Purpose of This Manual

This Manual provides law enforcement and the media with the framework needed to develop and implement a successful regional AMBER Alert Plan and to supplement and strengthen existing plans. It provides useful information that includes:

- Roles and responsibilities of law enforcement, the media, and support agencies.
- When and how to activate an AMBER Alert.
- Contact information on resource agencies, including the California Highway Patrol, Governor's Office of Emergency Services, and California Department of Justice.
- Convenient *AMBER Alert Activation Guide* for use by law enforcement personnel.
- References and resource material to aid in the recovery of abducted children.
- Copies of sample local plans.

