2026 ISSUE 3

THE AMBER ADVOCATE

Hidden in Plain Sight

Jessika Svendgard survived a sex trafficker and an entire system of near misses. Her story reveals why training, trauma awareness, and human decency mean the difference between rescue and return.

OJJDP

AMBER ALERT®

IN THIS ISSUE

03 **COVER STORY | Hidden in Plain Sight**
Jessika Svendgard's story reveals how training and human decency mean the difference between rescue and return.

10 **FACES | Marshaling a Cause**
This retired U.S. Marshal transitioned from hunting fugitives to finding missing children and assisting local agencies.

13 **FRONTLINES | The App-to-App Trap**
Coordinated digital forensics, platform responsiveness, and a silent pursuit rapidly recovered two sisters lured from Florida.

17 **NEWS BRIEFS | U.S., International & Indian Country**
Catch up on AMBER Alert and child protection news.

20 **COURSES OF ACTION | Knowledge Is Power**
Access to AATTAP's trusted trainings and helpful resources is just a QR code scan away.

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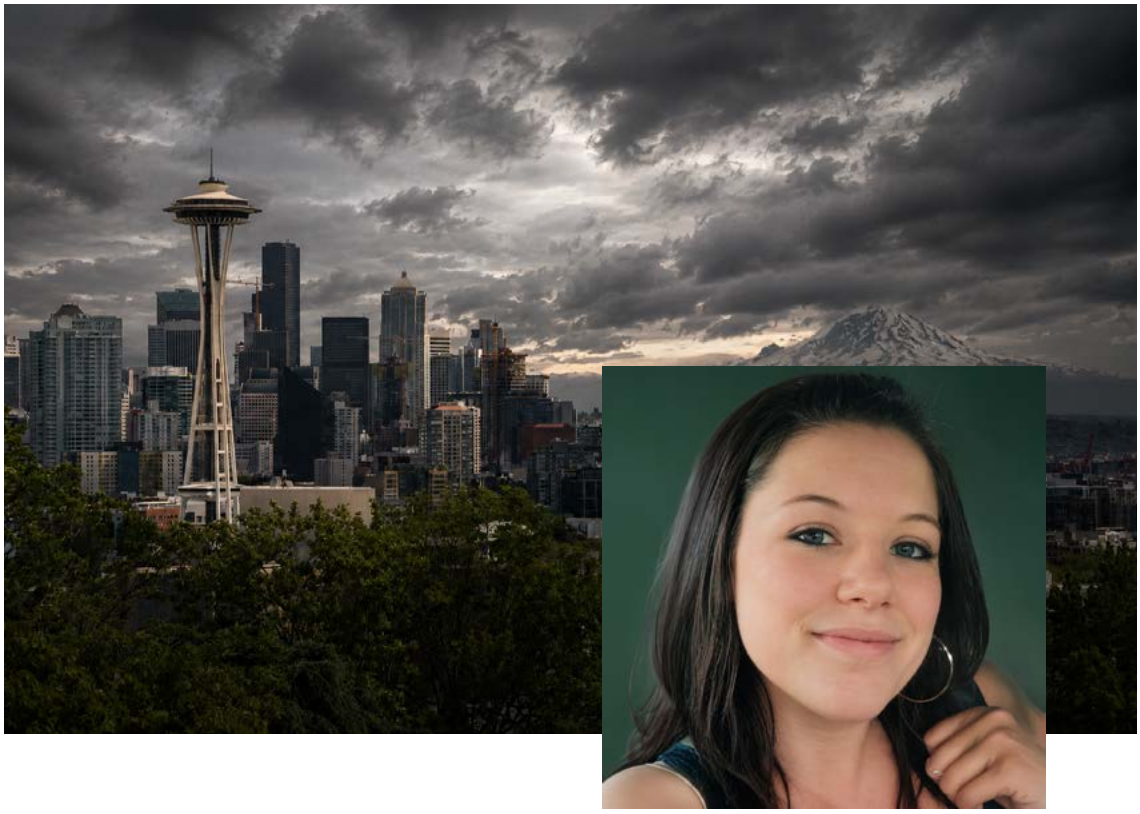
This project was supported by Grant # 15PJDP-23-GK-00776-MECP awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.

By Denise Gee Peacock



Hidden in Plain Sight

Jessika Svendgard survived not only a sex trafficker, but an entire system of near misses. Her story—and the experts determined to change it—reveal why training, trauma awareness, and a single act of human decency can mean the difference between rescue and return.

Jessika Svendgard was 15 and barefoot as she ran toward the frenetic parking lot of Seattle's King County Jail in March 2010. She had escaped captivity and repeated sexual assault, and a taxi driver had dropped her there believing it was a police station. She told the first officer she saw her name, that she had been missing for 10 days, and that she needed to call her mother.

The officer handed her his phone. No questions. No report. No pause long enough to see what stood in front of him.

Hours later, Jessika and her mother sat in a hospital anticipating a sexual assault examination. "We won't be doing any forensic work; she's had too many partners," the doctor told them. Jessika was given a pamphlet on domestic violence and sent home.

Continues on next page

"I definitely didn't feel seen," Jessika says. "I didn't feel like anyone really cared."

Both professional oversights fed into Jessika reconnecting with Candace, a woman from a homeless youth shelter who had befriended her—and who had, Jessika now understands, been grooming her all along. "Even though Candace was responsible for taking me to the men who first abused me, the fact that she understood and seemed to feel bad about everything made me think she was the only one who got what I was going through," Jessika recalls. "She listened. She wasn't freaked out. She wasn't uncomfortable." It felt like healing.

Within weeks, Candace proposed a plan—Greyhound tickets to California, a new start—and Jessika left home again, this time pulled not by anger but by a manufactured sense of belonging. California never materialized. Candace robbed and beat her, leaving Jessika injured, barely clothed, and alone on the street. She was taken in by a man named Baruti, who presented himself as a protector. Within days he had introduced trafficking.

That distinction, Jessika says, is one of the most misunderstood elements of trafficking: "It doesn't always look scary. It doesn't always look forced."

Before any of this, the ninth grader had been a straight-A student and soccer champion in the Seattle suburb of Auburn, Washington. "Each time I was gone I felt increasingly tainted, unlovable," she says. "It became a vicious circle."

> *I definitely didn't feel seen. I didn't feel like anyone really cared.*
>
>
>
> **Jessika Svendgard**
> Survivor

Telling It Like It Is

Jessika's story is not just about surviving sex trafficking; it's a case study in missed opportunities. Whenever she can, she tells it during child sex trafficking (CST) classes conducted by the AMBER Alert Training & Technical Assistance Program (AATTAP) of the National Criminal Justice Training Center (NCJTC)—discussing every point where more attentive or empathetic law enforcement could have helped her break free.

A few months into her trafficking, Jessika and Baruti were pulled over for questioning in a known trafficking corridor in downtown Seattle. "There I was, looking every bit of 15, traveling with a guy twice my age—and a large bag of condoms visible on the backseat," she recalls. The officers accepted the explanation that she was his girlfriend. One even joked about the condoms. "I remember thinking, how are you not connecting this. Is this how easy it is to commit crimes in front of police officers?"

Later, she was arrested on a trespassing charge after a vice sting at a hotel and held for six hours in lingerie, without anyone offering so much as a jacket. Officers spent hours trying to determine whether she was a missing person—but because her case had never been entered into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database when her mother called to report her missing, her photo wasn't in the system. They never identified her. Baruti was waiting outside when she was released.

Continues on page 6

What the Research—and Jessika—Want You to Know

Consider some of the key takeaways for law enforcement from AATTAP-NCJTC child sex trafficking training.

- **There is no such thing as a safe runaway.** Every missing child should be considered a missing, endangered child.
- **Notice what is in front of you.** Age disparity. Inappropriate clothing for the weather or situation. Visible condoms. These are not unrelated details. Connect the dots.
- **NCIC entry is not optional.** Trafficking survivor Jessika Svendgard was held for six hours at a police station while officers tried to determine if she was missing—and never identified her, because her case had never been entered into the database. The trespass paperwork she walked out with became proof of a false identity. A missed entry can close every door.
- **Separate the child from the adult.** A girl will not tell you the truth with her trafficker standing next to her. Find a reason, however low-key, to speak with her alone. She may not volunteer anything, but the dynamic shifts the moment he is out of earshot.
- **Grooming looks like love.** Traffickers target children from foster care, neglect, and abuse—kids for whom the trafficker may be the first consistent source of attention and affection. "It doesn't always look scary," Jessika says. "It doesn't always look forced." Understanding why a child is loyal to their exploiter is the first step to reaching them.
- **Go at their pace, not yours.** Patrol interviews are often rapid-fire, says Special Agent Blaine Phillips. Trafficking victims require a different rhythm. Ask less. Listen more. Follow their lead. You may only get 30% of the story the first time, but that is still progress.
- **They can read you.** Act accordingly. "These girls are expert at reading people," says Detective Bill Guyer. "If you go in thinking, 'let's just get this one over with'—that opinion is going to come out." Victims will not open up to someone who doesn't care, and they will know immediately whether you do. Your attitude is part of your technique.
- **Start with basic needs, not questions.** Food. Warmth. A jacket. Something to drink. Before the interview, before the paperwork, meet the basic needs first. Guyer describes pulling through a McDonald's drive-through at midnight not because it's protocol, but because something shifts when you sit and eat together. The walls come down.
- **Avoid 'gotcha!' moments.** Harsh treatment confirms every suspicion a victim has about law enforcement. But yielding too easily produces whatever answer gets them out the door fastest. When something doesn't add up, don't confront it; note it. Say something like, "That doesn't really make sense based on what you told me earlier. We'll come back to it." She will know you caught her in a lie without feeling like less of a person. Trust builds.
- **An embedded advocate changes outcomes.** Even when a victim won't speak to law enforcement, an advocate assigned to the unit can engage them on another level, connecting them to housing, transportation, and services without first requiring cooperation, notes Detective Heidi Chance. The Phoenix Police Department now assigns one directly to the unit. It works.
- **Go beyond the victim's testimony.** Victims recant. Traffickers control their story. Corroborate everything you can: cell phones, computers, hotel receipts, GPS records, surveillance footage, bank records, social media activity, medical records. The more evidence you build independent of the victim's testimony, the stronger the case—and the less she has to face him alone.

The King County Correctional Facility (top left); Washington Detective Bill Guyer (top right); notice of the seizure of Backpage.com (opposite page).

"There's no such thing as a safe runaway. It's a missing, endangered child.

Blaine Phillips

Special Agent with the Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation's Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force

The trespass paperwork she walked out with—bearing a false name—became proof of a false identity. "I'm officially 18. I'll never be found," she realized.

What Officers Need to Understand

Blaine Phillips, a Special Agent with the Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation's Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force, makes Jessika's story a focal point of his AATTAP-NCJTC training. His core message: "There's no such thing as a safe runaway. It's a missing, endangered child." Children run toward a groomer or away from abuse; either way, they are in danger the moment they leave. He frames the myth that victims "choose" prostitution just as directly: "It's not that they're not a child sex trafficking victim; it's that we're a decade late in getting to them, even when we encounter adult victims involved in prostitution."

Fellow AATTAP-NCJTC instructor Heidi Chance—a former Phoenix police officer who spent more than 16 years investigating sex trafficking—notes that Phoenix did not begin training officers on human trafficking until 2014. "In 1998, when I was in the police academy, I never had a class on human trafficking," Chance says. "So you have a whole bunch of cops out there who have never learned about any of this, and the pimps are bragging that we don't see them." During her classes she often plays a video of a trafficker doing exactly that to make the point hit home.

Both instructors stress the psychology traffickers exploit. Many children they target come from foster care, neglect, or abuse; the trafficker may be the first person who ever showed them consistent affection—manufactured, yes, but real to the child experiencing it. Chance puts the psychology of control starkly: "A pimp is the most reliable person you'll ever meet. If they say they're going to beat you up, you can count on that. That's why victims are trapped."

What Right Looks Like

The break from trafficking came not from a dramatic moment of disclosure but from a quiet act of desperation. Alone for a moment with Baruti's computer, Jessika logged into her mother's email account and deleted everything—then composed one message:

backpage.com and affiliated websites have been seized

as part of an enforcement action by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, and the Internal Revenue Service Criminal Investigation Division, with analytical assistance from the Joint Regional Intelligence Center.

Other agencies participating in and supporting the enforcement action include the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of Arizona, the U.S. Department of Justice's Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section, the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Central District of California, the office of the California Attorney General, and the office of the Texas Attorney General.

Additional information will be provided at around 6:00 pm EST on Friday, April 6, by the U.S. Department of Justice, and all media inquiries should be directed to the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Public Affairs at 202-514-2007 and press@usdoj.gov.

April 6, 2018

"It's me. I love you. You're never going to want me back. Don't worry about me anymore."

Her parents brought that draft to a detective. The IP address was traced to Backpage.com postings. Meanwhile a Bellevue Police Department officer who had encountered Jessika during a shoplifting run-in had quietly been building a case—obtaining warrants, confirming her identity from old Facebook posts, connecting the dots to where Baruti was advertising her online. He reached out to the Seattle Police Department Vice Unit.

Detective Bill Guyer got the call at home, tired after a long day, and by his own admission took it with a bad attitude. What happened next changed everything.

At the hotel, the undercover detective who met Jessika had no shoes on, which was strange enough for her to drop her guard. When they reached the room, he casually opened a drawer. There she could see his badge and gun.

"Jessika, we found you," he said.

She hadn't heard her real name in months. This startled her, but she fell back into her trained persona. Then more officers arrived—and Guyer walked in.

While wearing lingerie, Jessika was calling Guyer every name she had learned on the street. He moved her handcuffs to the front. He draped his jacket over her shoulders. And once in his vehicle, he asked—*asked*—before reaching across her to buckle her seatbelt.

"I still remember him making sure I was comfortable—and his simple acts of humanity," Jessika says. "Like I was a person. Like I was a kid. Like I was fragile."

She kept throwing insults. He kept his composure—not in an aloof way, but with the quiet confidence of someone who could see past her performance to the child underneath. "At one point I told her, 'Look, I can't be *all* those things you're calling me,'" Guyer recalls. "'Pick one or two and stick with them. Otherwise you're just losing your impact.'"

Talking the Talk

Years after Jessika's rescue, Guyer came across a line in a business leadership book that stopped him cold: "People respond more to how you feel about them than what you say." He's used it ever since, in every trafficking case, in every conversation with younger officers.

His practical guidance: slow down, go at the victim's pace, and start with basic needs—food, warmth, a jacket—before questions. He describes swinging through a McDonald's

Chart Your Course

AATTAP offers a variety of learning experiences to bolster your knowledge of child sex trafficking (CST) investigations, including the one- and two-day classes that often feature Jessika's survivor perspective. Check out all the offerings **here**.

Know the Numbers

Missing-child data is not trafficking data—but for law enforcement, it is often where trafficking first appears. "Missing doesn't always mean trafficked but trafficked often starts with missing," says AATTAP-NCJTC Curriculum Manager Cathy Delapaz.

- In 2025, the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) assisted with more than **32,000 reports of missing children**. Of those, **1 in 7 were likely victims of child sex trafficking**.
- Most victims of child sex trafficking are forced into it **from the ages of 12 to 14.**

"Even if a victim doesn't want to talk to law enforcement, the advocate can take them confidentially aside and talk to them about getting resources. That is huge.

Heidi Chance

Special Agent, Arizona Attorney General's Office; retired, Phoenix Police Department Human Exploitation and Trafficking Unit

drive-through at midnight, not because it's ideal, but because something shifts when you sit and eat together. "These girls are not eating well, not sleeping well," he says. "Start with the necessities. If they're obstinate, they're probably tired and cold. Try to go at their pace."

Guyer remembers that night not as a hero moment but as a reminder of what is possible when an officer decides, even while tired, to actually care. "I'd like to say that I'm that way every day," he says. "Some days I'm not. Two in the morning, dealing with a ton of things, you just want to go home. Then I wonder why an interview went nowhere. Because they could tell that I wasn't into it."

Phillips adds a case study he returns to often in training: a 14-year-old trafficking victim who was the most hostile witness he had ever encountered. With patience and time away from the trafficker's control, she became one of the best. Her testimony led to 12 felony convictions, including 11 buyers. "Don't let a rough first encounter define the whole case," he says. "Get what you can the day of recovery. Then do follow-up interviews."

Advocates Make an Impact

Recovery, Jessika says, didn't happen in a single moment. It happened because of people who stayed in the process long after the arrest was made.

A victim advocate named Noel—herself a survivor of 15 years of trafficking—gave Jessika something she hadn't found elsewhere: being understood without judgment.

When Jessika said she'd run again if sent home, Noel listened. Within days she had arranged placement in a group home with other trafficking survivors—a soft landing for someone who had been running at full speed.

- **323,767 missing person records involving juveniles under 18** were entered into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database in 2025, accounting for roughly **65% of all missing person entries nationwide**; **94.9%** were coded as **runaways**. By year's end, **21,487** juveniles were still listed as **actively missing**.
- Roughly **74% of missing child/runaway cases** reported to NCMEC in 2025 were **ages 15 to 17**. This demographic is targeted most aggressively by traffickers for "grooming" before the physical trafficking begins.
- **17% of the reports of children missing from child welfare** to NCMEC in 2025 were likely victims of child sex trafficking.
- In 2025, NCMEC received more than **113,500 reports of possible child sex trafficking, a 323% increase** from 2024.
- **Boys are as likely as girls to be sex trafficked.** However, they are less likely to be identified and reported.

A note about the data: *The* **REPORT Act***'s strengthened standards give NCMEC a more accurate picture of online child sex trafficking. Prior to the Act in 2023, platforms submitted 8,480 CyberTipline reports. By 2025, the first full year of implementation, reports surged to 105,877—a 1,100% increase, demonstrating the profound impact of expanded reporting requirements.*

Chance points to embedded advocates as one of the most systemic changes law enforcement can make. The Phoenix Police Department now assigns one directly to its Human Exploitation and Trafficking Unit. "Even if a victim doesn't want to talk to law enforcement, the advocate can take them confidentially aside and talk to them about getting resources," she says. "That is huge."

The threat landscape keeps shifting. Chance notes the average entry age into sex trafficking has fallen to 13, and she recently helped recover an 11-year-old. Groomers no longer lurk near shelters; they work social media and online gaming platforms. Her book, *Talk to Them*, was written to bring parents into the conversation before law enforcement ever needs to be.

Be the Difference

Jessika's trafficker was the first person convicted under Washington state's commercial sex abuse of a minor statute. He received 26.5 years and was required to register as a sex offender. Jessika testified in two separate trials, helping put away not only him but a man who had posed as a police officer to assault her and others. And in 2018 she became part of the effort to bring down Backpage.com (detailed in the documentary ***I Am Jane Doe***).

She and her mother now consult for the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children and volunteer with its Team HOPE program, supporting young survivors of trafficking, sexual abuse material, and sextortion. Both are also AATTAP-NCJTC Associates who bring their family's story to training rooms whenever possible. And by the end of each session, Phillips says, "everyone wants to be Bill [Guyer]." Guyer attended Jessika's wedding. He is the godfather of her eldest daughter. "You can be the hero in someone's story, even through what can seem like a small action," Phillips tells officers. "See the kid in front of you instead of just another case."

"My faith in law enforcement has never wavered," Jessika says. "I know that if you were faced with a situation like I was put in, you would make the difference for someone. I can see that just by you being present."

By Jody Garlock

Marshaling a Cause

This retired U.S. Marshal hunted down fugitives until a federal law opened a new pursuit: finding missing children and raising awareness of the Marshals' ability to assist local agencies.

Bill Boldin is one of those people who always knew what he wanted to do in life. At age 15, he became a youth cadet for the Canton, Ohio, Police Department, where he learned about law enforcement, experienced different types of training, and volunteered at events. That early stint solidified his desire to work in law enforcement and ultimately led to a more than 30-year career, much of it spent with the U.S. Marshals Service (USMS).

What he didn't anticipate was that the same relentless pursuit that defined his fugitive work would lead him to one of the most meaningful chapters of his career. In 2015, after passage of a federal law that allows the Marshals to assist local agencies in missing children investigations, Boldin was tasked with developing a program for the USMS Northern District of Ohio. "Over the next six or so years, more than 250 missing children were found in Northern Ohio, and they still lead the nation in recoveries to this day," says Boldin, who went on to become the national coordinator for the USMS National Missing Child Program.

We talked with Boldin, who retired from the USMS in late 2025, about his career and about the Marshals' role in helping find missing juveniles—a function that may not be widely known even a decade later.

> **The USMS can do everything to find missing kids that they do to find fugitives. ... The Marshals are the best at finding people who don't want to be found.**
>
> **Bill Boldin**
>
> Retired USMS Inspector & Former Coordinator of the National Missing Child Program

How is it that the Marshals became involved in missing children investigations?

The 2015 JVTA [Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act] provided USMS the statutory authority to assist with missing juvenile cases. Prior to that, the child had to be with a registered sex offender or fugitive. The USMS can do everything to find missing kids that they do to find fugitives—that's actually how they got into the business. The Marshals are the best at finding people who don't want to be found. The vast majority of missing juveniles are high-risk runaways who are actively trying to not be found by parents, social services, or the police, or they are with age-inappropriate adults who are trying to hide them.

Talk a bit about that—children who have run away from home and the importance of finding them.

In the past, repeat runaways were considered

habitual and not many departments put forth the effort to find them. That has really changed. We realize that there is no shortage of adults waiting to take advantage of every kid out there who's a runaway. It's impossible for them to stay a runaway without some adult 'help.' It's not just that it leads to trafficking and sexual abuse, it's all levels—retail theft rings, drugs. It's rare, if ever, that we recover a runaway and there isn't all kinds of criminal activity occurring in the same place.

What makes the Marshals a good fit for investigating missing children cases?

The same skill set used to hunt down fugitives is the same used to find missing kids. It's a combination of deep-diving into a person's digital presence and old-fashioned police work—getting off your butt and knocking on doors. You're not going to find fugitives or missing kids while sitting behind your desk. When we're out looking for a missing kid, we get such a positive response from the community.

What should law enforcement understand about the USMS involvement in missing children cases?

There are two main points. First, the child must have been reported missing prior to their 18th birthday. USMS can't work missing adults but can work the case as long as they were a juvenile when they went missing. Second, there must be a request or approval from the originating law enforcement agency. USMS can't take direct requests from the public.

It's been more than 10 years since the JVTA law passed. Are people aware of it and what it allows?

For years it wasn't really known to local law enforcement that the Marshals could help, but it's becoming more known. It was definitely a goal of the agency to try to get the word out. USMS has legal authority, but zero congressional funding for the Missing Child Program. As a result, different offices in different parts of the country have varying degrees of ability to assist

Top left: *Bill Boldin, retired USMS Inspector & former coordinator of the National Missing Child Program, talks with Byron Fassett, AATTAP Deputy Administrator, during the 2025 AMBER Alert and AMBER Alert In Indian Country Symposium.*

Top right: *Bill Boldin is shown speaking at the national symposium.*

583 missing children were located or recovered with assistance from the U.S. Marshals, according to fiscal year 2025 data. In that same period, the USMS received **823** requests from law enforcement for assistance in missing child cases.

USMS located or recovered more than **4,561** missing children since 2015, when it received enhanced authority. Of those recovered, **61%** were found within seven days.

with the program. Not all have sufficient manpower.

Do you have a success story to share with us?

One specifically involved an AMBER Alert. A subject in southern Ohio assaulted and attempted to murder his ex-wife and abducted three young children. He was extremely violent and a danger to the children. Hours later, phone pings placed him in Cleveland, but then the phone was shut off. It was a densely populated urban area with apartment buildings, and the subject had no known connections to the area. While searching for his vehicle, an AMBER Alert tip reported a possible sighting in that area. Based on that tip, we had a much smaller area to search. When the subject was located, he ran. He was caught but refused to say where the children were. A door-to-door search in the building found them alone in a vacant apartment.

What are you doing now that you've retired from the USMS?

I'm working part-time as a detective with the Dalton, Ohio, Police Department and am assisting other agencies with long-term missing child cases. I'm still a committee member and actively involved with the National Missing and Unidentified Persons Conference [part of the National Criminal Justice Training Center of Fox Valley Technical College]. I'm also a member of the Ohio Missing Persons Investigative Network run by the Ohio Attorney General's Office. Police work gets in your blood—it's in your system. You'll see an AMBER Alert, and it's everything to not get in your car and go. So I'm still staying involved. I'm looking for my next adventure.

Seeking USMS Assistance?

Contacting a local U.S. Marshals Service office is typically the easiest and fastest way to seek potential support from USMS in a missing and endangered child case. Other options include emailing **missingchildunit@usdoj.gov** and requesting assistance form USM-641.

By Denise Gee Peacock

The App-to-App Trap

How coordinated digital forensics, platform responsiveness, and a 'silent pursuit' led to the rapid recovery of two sisters lured from their Florida home.

On Discord, two South Florida girls, ages 15 and 12, found an unmonitored world of gaming servers, homework-help channels, and late-night conversations with strangers who quickly felt familiar. It was anonymous. It was fun. And from inside their home, it was contained to a screen.

What the sisters couldn't see, at least not at first, was that the same anonymity fueling their sense of independence also made the platform an ideal hunting ground for adults seeking to groom and exploit minors.

It started with a DoorDash delivery of free Chipotle, which the girls explained to family members as simply a fortuitous mistake.

Continues on next page

Then, in January of this year, a man arrived.

By that point, investigators with the Martin County, Florida, Sheriff's Office (MCSO) say the sisters had been communicating for months with 19-year-old Hser Mu Lah Say of Omaha, Nebraska. What began on Discord migrated, as these interactions often do, to Snapchat and Instagram—platforms offering more privacy, fewer safeguards, and disappearing messages.

Authorities say Lah Say reinforced the relationship with small gestures, including sending food deliveries through DoorDash—acts that blurred the line between online acquaintance and real-world presence.

MCSO Sheriff John Budensiek describes a pattern consistent with grooming: building trust over time, establishing emotional connection, and gradually normalizing secrecy. Then, investigators say, Lah Say acted—driving nearly 1,500 miles, about 23 hours straight, to meet the girls at a pre-arranged location in Indiantown, Florida, on Jan. 31.

Detective Jennifer Escobar of the MCSO Special Victims Unit moved quickly. Working alongside the girls' family, she conducted a forensic review of an iPad the sisters had left behind after telling relatives they were going for a walk to a nearby park, where Lah Say was reportedly waiting.

Though the girls attempted to erase their digital trail, fragments still remained.

Escobar uncovered a Snapchat username—enough to begin pulling the thread. After establishing exigent circumstances (the girls were in imminent danger), the platform provided her with a phone number linked to the account within minutes.

"The response time was phenomenal," she says. "Snapchat really broke this case."

Working with AT&T, investigators began pinging the device every five minutes. The signal was moving—northbound on I-75, and accelerating away. But they still didn't know what they were looking for. What vehicle were they in?

Retracing the suspect's movements, investigators identified two nearby convenience stores and reviewed surveillance footage. They confirmed Lah Say's presence, and captured images of him and his dark-colored Honda SUV.

That description, along with photos, was shared with law enforcement agencies across state lines, turning a digital breadcrumb trail into a real-world pursuit.

Meanwhile, a multistate AMBER Alert was prepared but not immediately issued. "We had it ready to go, but knowing where the vehicle was traveling, we decided to hold off on issuing it," MCSO Sergeant Joseph Deckard says, describing the strategy as a "silent pursuit."

"We had reason to believe he was monitoring digital channels," Deckard says. "The last thing we wanted was for him to panic or shut off his phone when we were closing in on him."

By midnight Lah Say and the girls were near the Florida-Georgia border, traveling northeast of Tallahassee. The Lowndes County, Georgia, Sheriff's Office and Georgia State Patrol and Hahira, Georgia, Police Department joined the search.

At about 1 a.m. Feb. 1, a Hahira officer spotted the SUV and conducted a traffic stop. The girls were found safe, and Lah Say was taken into custody. He faces two counts of kidnapping and two counts of interfering with child custody.

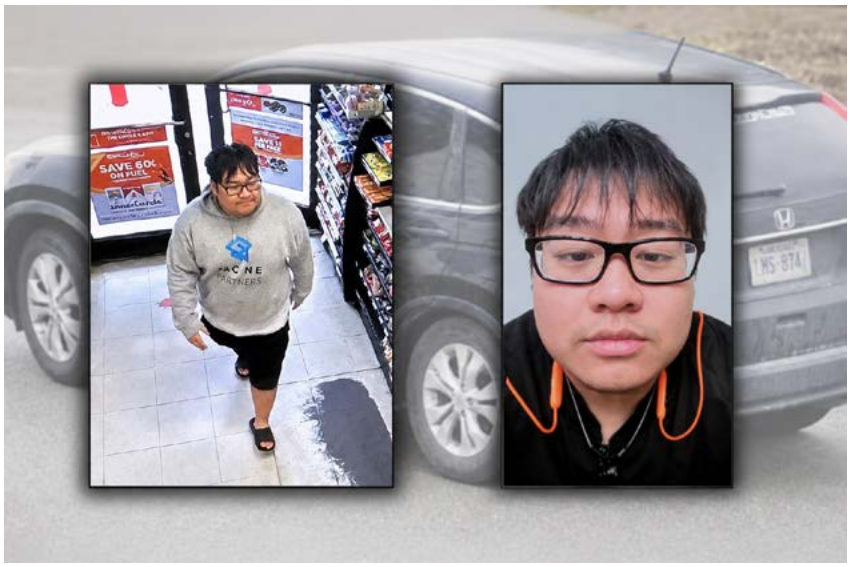
"We were all ecstatic, and so relieved," Escobar says.

Hahira Police Chief Stryde Jones credits coordination among agencies. "This is a perfect example of how we as a team can work well with each other by sharing information so quickly. It made all the difference."

At the start of the investigation, authorities did not know how the communication had unfolded. That became clear only after the girls returned home.

Investigators learned from the sisters that they had initially connected with Lah Say on Discord before he moved them to Snapchat and Instagram—a tactic consistent with grooming patterns: initial contact on one platform, migration to private apps, and eventually, an in-person meeting.

"It's a common 'app-surfing' scenario used to cover tracks," says Escobar, who praised the family's quick action in providing access to the girls' digital devices. Escobar also notes that the girls' willingness to leave with Lah Say



Suspect Hser Mu Lah Say caught on a convenience store security camera (top left); his gamer profile picture (top right); and his Honda CR-V (top background).

Three Red Flags

Grooming often follows recognizable patterns. Martin County, Florida, Sheriff's Office Detective Jennifer Escobar identifies three warning signs caregivers should consider when children have access to social media.

1. **Seclusion.** Is a child spending unusual amounts of time alone communicating secretly?
2. **Unexplained gifts.** Unexpected deliveries or gifts may signal outside contact.
3. **Heavy app use.** Watch for increased use of apps that are designed for privacy or disappearing communication.

Top Operational Takeaways

- **Digital evidence recovery is time critical.** Even partial data (e.g., usernames) can rapidly develop into actionable intelligence when paired with exigent requests.
- **Platform cooperation can be decisive.** Rapid response from social media providers significantly reduced investigative lag time.
- **Real-time tracking enables strategic flexibility.** Frequent location pings allowed investigators to monitor movement without alerting the suspect.
- **AMBER Alert deployment requires case-by-case assessment.** In this case, delaying public alerting preserved operational advantage and reduced risk to victims.
- **Interagency communication drives outcomes.** Timely BOLO dissemination and coordination across jurisdictions were essential to rapid recovery.

does not diminish the seriousness of the crime. "Yes, they ran away from home with him, but they're just children. Their brains are not fully developed. 'Left willingly' often means they were groomed and coerced."

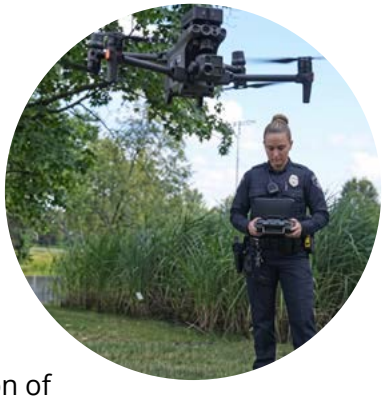
Budensiek believes the multistate teams collectively thwarted a far-worse outcome.

"The suspect repeatedly warned the girls that he could get into a lot of trouble for what he was about to do. He knew he was violating the law. If we didn't find those girls in a timely manner, they could have ended up in Omaha, Nebraska, as missing.

NEWS BRIEFS

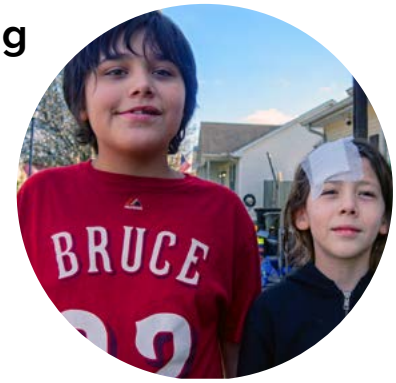
UNITED STATES

Drones and AMBER Alerts Lead to a Safe Recovery in Castroville



Following an **abduction of a 4-year-old** at a Monterey, California, motel, the suspect, Daniel Hutchens, fled in a rental car at speeds exceeding 100 mph. The **AMBER Alert was activated** shortly after the suspect abandoned his vehicle. Within approximately three hours of the initial report, community members in Castroville, California, spotted the pair and alerted 911. Recovery was expedited by the deployment of multi-agency drone teams, which tracked the suspect moving through a neighborhood near a middle school. This combination of public vigilance and real-time aerial surveillance allowed officers to converge and secure the child without further incident.

Rapid Social Media Mobilization Locates Missing Siblings in Kentucky



Although the case did not meet the **strict criteria for an AMBER Alert**—which require evidence of an abduction and immediate danger—Georgetown, Kentucky, Police utilized a "community-first" notification strategy in the **safe recovery** of 11- and 8-year-old siblings. Following a public appeal that garnered thousands of social media shares, the children were located within 48 hours of their disappearance. Law enforcement credited the "quick response and assistance" of local residents as the primary factor in the safe recovery.

Operation Safe Return: 37 Missing Minors Recovered

A large-scale law enforcement sweep in Riverside County, California, known as **Operation Safe Return**, has successfully recovered 37 missing minors. The collaborative effort—involving local police, the Riverside County Sheriff's Department, the California Highway Patrol, and the state DOJ—demonstrates the massive impact of multi-agency coordination. The operation's success heavily relied on cross-referencing information within the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database, allowing state and federal authorities to efficiently identify and locate these vulnerable youths. This operation emphasizes the critical importance of updated, accessible NCIC records and fostering strong inter-agency data sharing to help bring missing children home.

Coast-to-Coast MMIR Advocacy Prompts Indigenous Alert Laws

Recent Missing and Murdered Indigenous Relatives (MMIR) marches in states including **Minnesota**, **Michigan**, **North Carolina**, and **Alaska** highlight a nationwide demand for interagency coordination. With Indigenous populations overrepresented in missing persons data, grassroots advocacy continues to spur legislative action and yield vital recovery tools. Key advances include Arizona's **Emily's Law**, which launched a Turquoise Alert; California legislation establishing a pilot program that **grants Tribal police state peace officer authority** to remove investigatory barriers; and the Federal Communications Commission's adoption of a new Missing and Endangered Persons, or MEP, **alert code**. The new code enables rapid public broadcasts for vulnerable individuals who fall outside strict AMBER Alert criteria.

High-Risk Missing Teen Located Safely Within 30 Minutes

The rapid recovery of a **13-year-old Native American teen** in Great Falls, Montana, provides a powerful blueprint for resolving high-risk missing youth cases. The juvenile, who was critically endangered due to prior injuries, was located safe just 30 minutes after the Great Falls Police Department issued a localized digital alert. This success underscores that when strict AMBER Alert criteria are not met, immediate deployment of targeted social media and community bulletins is vital. Standardizing these public notification protocols allows law enforcement to quickly engage local intelligence, converting community awareness into a rapid and safe recovery.

Legislative Update: Strengthening Recovery Efforts in Indian Country

The **Tribal Warrant Fairness Act** (H.R. 7490) marks a critical shift in missing child recovery. Historically, jurisdictional gaps prevented the **U.S. Marshals Service** (USMS) from executing Tribal warrants, often stalling investigations. This bill grants the USMS authority to assist Tribes directly, mirroring their support for state agencies where 61% of children are recovered within seven days. By integrating Tribal law enforcement into the **Fugitive Apprehension Task Force**, the act ensures rapid, multi-agency response. This coordination is vital for cases like Emily Pike's, where delays across reservation lines can be fatal. The legislation was **referred** to the House Committee on the Judiciary Action on February 11.

Bengaluru's 'Safe City' Tech: Automated Dispatch Cuts Rescue Times to 4 Minutes

Bengaluru City Police in India are setting a global standard for rapid child recovery, reuniting six missing children in 12 days with **response times as fast as four minutes**. Through the "Safe City Project," the department integrates Namma-112 with an **AI-powered Command Centre** that automates patrol dispatch via real-time geolocation. The actionable takeaway is the integration of **SIP technology**. This allows citizens to track approaching units "Uber-style" and enables immediate two-way video verification, removing manual delays. This seamless tech stack reduces recovery windows drastically, prompting a recent visit from the police from Dubai, United Arab Emirates, to study the model.

EU's ePrivacy Derogation Expiration Brings New Challenges to Missing Child Recovery

A critical legal shift in the European Union has created a "safety gap". On April 3, 2026, the **temporary derogation to the EU's ePrivacy Directive expired**, stripping tech companies of the legal framework to voluntarily detect and report Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM). Because automated **platform detection** often provides the crucial first digital breadcrumbs for identifying missing children globally, this legislative void will likely result in a drop in initial digital reports. For coordinators and dedicated law enforcement teams, this means adapting recovery strategies to overcome the growing digital gap. Coordinators can successfully pivot by expanding community-led tip programs, utilizing advanced open-source intelligence (OSINT), and fostering robust cross-border partnerships to ensure that endangered children are still rapidly identified, tracked, and safely recovered.

Early Morning Public Tip Secures Safe Recovery of Two Boys

At 4:25 a.m. on a Sunday, the **Sûreté du Québec broadcast a provincewide alert** for a 2-year-old and 4-year-old abducted from Trois-Rivières. Despite the broadcast occurring during off-peak sleep hours, the alert successfully mobilized the community. Within hours, crucial information received from the public directly guided investigators to Saint-Paulin, approximately 60 km away, where both children were safely recovered and the suspect was arrested. This case validates standard operating procedures: prioritizing immediate alert dissemination, even in the middle of the night, can be a highly effective strategy for generating life-saving community tips and rapidly resolving abductions.

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