

THE AMBER ADVOCATE

BRINGING OUR MISSING



CHILDREN HOME!

2021 Missing Children's Day Poster Contest Winner, by fifth-grader Heidi Jimena Perez Veleta from Dodge City, Kansas

2021 NATIONAL MISSING CHILDREN'S DAY



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Your story ideas and pictures are welcome.

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2021 NATIONAL MISSING CHILDREN'S DAY



(Left) Attorney General Merrick B. Garland, (top right) Associate Attorney General Vanita Gupta, and (bottom right) Acting Administrator, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Chyrl Jones

Missing Children's Day is celebrated in the U.S. and around the globe. Annual remembrance reminds everyone to join the fight to bring missing and abducted children home.

For nearly four decades the U.S. has been recognizing National Missing Children's Day as a way to raise awareness of missing and abducted children and to teach parents how to keep kids safe. In 1983, President Ronald Reagan proclaimed May 25 as National Missing Children's Day, six years after Etan Patz went missing. The disappearance of the six-year-old New York City boy launched a movement to create legislation and programs to better understand the scope and scale of issues around missing children, and to respond more effectively to locate and safely recover them.

In 2001, May 25 was also recognized as International Missing Children's Day, thanks to the efforts of the International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children (ICMEC) and the European Commission. The forget-me-not flower is recognized as the emblem for the international day.

"We remember today all missing children; those who have been recovered and reunited with their families and those who have not come home," said Janell Rasmussen, Administrator for the AMBER Alert Training and Technical Assistance Program (AATTAP). "We honor them and their families as their fight continues, and we support and advocate for them daily as we stand side by side with them to protect, recover and reunite all children. We also honor all those who have done so much to protect children, recover the lost and prosecute the predators across the nation."

2021 NATIONAL MISSING CHILDREN'S DAY

On this year's 38th annual National Missing Children's Day, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) recognized those who have made extraordinary efforts in protecting children from harm and bringing perpetrators to justice.

Continued on next page

2021 NATIONAL MISSING CHILDREN'S DAY

Continued from page 3

While an in-person awards ceremony did not take place due to precautions around the COVID-19 pandemic, the DOJ continued its tradition of presenting law enforcement and community awards through virtual and other web platforms.

Four detectives and one sergeant of the Fresno County Sheriff's Office's Central California Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) Task Force were recognized for their joint investigation that resulted in the arrest of 34 sexual predators. The officers received the Attorney General's Special Commendation for "Operation COVID Chatdown." The summer 2020 campaign targeted perpetrators who sought to take advantage of the increased presence of children online during the pandemic.

"These five highly skilled and resourceful officers uncovered a well-organized and very disturbing scheme to exploit and harm children in the midst of a pandemic when young people were especially vulnerable to online predators," said Amy Solomon, Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General for the Department's Office of Justice Programs."

The DOJ also honored others for their efforts to protect children:

- **Missing Children's Citizen Award** - U.S. Postal Service employee Keith Rollins received the award for helping locate a 2-year-old boy who went missing after he followed an adult out of his house.
- **Missing Children's Law Enforcement Award** - Addison, Illinois, Police Department Sergeant Stefan Bjes was recognized for training 15 police departments across the Midwest and presenting at national police conferences about enhancing the safety of children with special needs.
- **Missing Children's Child Protection Award** - Amanda Leonard and Kaleilani

Grant from the Hawaii Attorney General's Missing Child Center received the award for implementing Operation Shine the Light, a joint effort between law enforcement and non-profit agencies to help recover 180 missing children from November 2019 to November 2020.

- **Missing Children's Day Poster Contest** - Dodge City, Kansas, fifth-grader Heidy Jimena Perez Veleta was honored as the winner of the national poster contest for her artwork which depicts two hands forming a heart around a small child.

Click [here](#) for more details about each of the National Missing Children's Day honorees.

OTHER 2021 NATIONAL MISSING CHILDREN'S DAY ACTIVITIES

Law enforcement agencies and child advocacy groups also recognized National Missing Children's Day at the state and local level. Here is a small sample of activities held:

- In **Cleveland, Ohio**, the FBI and Cleveland Police Department set up a booth at a shopping mall to offer tips to parents on how to keep their kids safe.
- In **Rochester, New York**, cyclists participated in a 350-mile, cross-state ride to raise awareness and funds for missing children efforts and to celebrate the life of Brittanee Drexel, who went missing in 2009.
- In **Dallas, Texas**, the Texas Center for the Missing and Clear Channel Outdoor Americas used digital billboards throughout the state to show an age-progressed photo of Maria Elizalde, a 17-year-old girl who went missing in 2015.

2021 INTERNATIONAL MISSING CHILDREN'S DAY

ICMEC and AMBER Alert Europe, the umbrella organization for most child abduction alert systems in Europe, highlighted this year's International Missing Children's Day by releasing a video showing how a TikTok dance challenge is being used to educate teenagers about signs of child grooming. The viral video kicked off a global prevention campaign **#CheckBeforeYouChat**. A month before May 25, the song "Love Birds," secretly containing the five stages of online grooming in its lyrics, was officially released on the popular TikTok app. Another video was released later showing the dancers standing still and revealing the true meaning behind the TikTok challenge. More information about the campaign can be found [here](#).

AMBER Alert Europe recently released its 2020 Annual Report, which documents that 800,000 people go missing in Europe each year, with half of those missing being children. In its ongoing work, the organization reports the formation of new alliances with national police forces in Finland, Greece, Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Kosovo, Serbia, North-Macedonia, and Hungary; and with NGOs and child protection agencies in Greece, Albania, Israel, Portugal and Spain. [Click here for the full report](#).

The [Missing Children Society of Canada](#)

(MCSC) leveraged International Missing Children's Day to draw greater attention to cases of missing children across Canada. The society is urging the public to sign up for alerts and help in the search for missing children.

FINAL THOUGHTS

AATTAP Administrator Janell Rasmussen also used the day to discuss future activities to protect missing and abducted children. Those efforts include holding virtual meetings in 2021 to discuss strengths and challenges for all state AMBER Alert and Missing Children Clearinghouse programs. The "50 States Initiative" will include facilitated discussions with key program representatives from each state and will focus on understanding their needs around training and technical assistance which can inform and support best practices for law enforcement response and processes related to AMBER Alert and related public alerting programs.

"Each child recovered as a result of an AMBER Alert, good police work and involvement and help from the public is a success," added Rasmussen. "We work continuously to improve our program in providing training, technical assistance and resources through the U.S. Department of Justice to help law enforcement and other child protection workers to prevent abductions and quickly recover missing children."

The collage features four award certificates and one poster contest announcement. The certificates are for:

- Missing Children's Citizen Award:** Keith Rollins, United States Postal Service, Washington, DC.
- Missing Children's Child Protection Award:** Kaveiani Grant, Assistant Coordinator, Department of the Attorney General, Missing Child Center - Hawaii, Honolulu, HI.
- Missing Children's Law Enforcement Award:** Stefan Bjes, Sergeant, Addison Police Department, Addison, IL.
- Missing Children's Child Protection Award:** Amanda Leonard, Program Coordinator, Department of the Attorney General, Missing Child Center - Hawaii, Honolulu, HI.

The poster contest announcement is for the **National Missing Children's Day 2021 Poster Contest Winner**, Heidi Jimena Perez Veleta, Sunnyside Elementary School, Dodge City, Kansas. The poster features the text "BRINGING OUR MISSING CHILDREN HOME!" with a drawing of hands holding a house.

[Click to View More Honorees](#)

AMBER ALERT ON THE FRONT LINES:

Suspect in armed child abduction turns himself in after quick work by Missouri AMBER Alert partners

Three men burst into a St. Joseph, Missouri, home and took a two-year-old girl at gunpoint and then fled with the child. Police say the non-custodial father had a physical confrontation with the mother before leaving.

The alleged abduction took place on March 15, 2021, at 3:30 p.m. Authorities received the call about the kidnapping seven minutes later.

At 4:20 p.m., communication operators Melanie Stallsworth and Kristen Bartles, with the Missouri State Highway Patrol, took a call about the armed home invasion and

A conference call with the St. Joseph Police Department was quickly established and an AMBER Alert was requested.

Missouri AMBER Alert Coordinator and State Highway Patrol Captain Corey Schoeneberg said recent events helped inform the decision about whether to issue an alert. This case involved a non-custodial father; and the event occurred less than one month after a separate incident in which a custodial parent killed two of his children before committing suicide.

“Making a judgement call as to what is a credible threat, reasonable threat, sufficient evidence of harm or whatever the language used may be, is not an easy call; and sometimes it is best to err on the side of caution,” said Schoeneberg. “Like all cases, a judgment call was made quickly based on the information available.”

AMBER ALERT ISSUED

Alternate AMBER Alert Coordinator Lieutenant Kevin Hunter was on duty and discussed with his team the scope and content of the Wireless Emergency Alert (WEA). A regional activation was approved, and the AMBER Alert was issued at 4:34 p.m., just 14 minutes after the request was made.

Missouri partners with Twitter and the WEA message includes a uniform resource locator (URL). The link directs the public to Twitter where the public can access the AMBER Alert bulletin.



Missouri AMBER Alert Coordinator and State Highway Patrol Captain Corey Schoeneberg (left), and Assistant Chief Paula Heckes (right)

child abduction and immediately notified those responsible for issuing alerts.

The Buchanan County Sheriff's Department assisted in the investigation and discovered the suspect's vehicle – but it was empty. The suspect learned from his former employer about the AMBER Alert and he voluntarily surrendered himself and the child at the St. Joseph Police Department at 5:21 p.m., only 47 minutes after the alert was issued. The AMBER Alert was cancelled three minutes later.

LESSONS LEARNED

“Our immediate thoughts revolve around the relevance of the AMBER Alert in this case; however, the fact the child was safely recovered and returned to the mother provides a sense of relief,” said Schoeneberg.

“You always have a huge knot in your stomach every time a child goes missing and you want to make sure that you find that child as quickly as possible; safe, healthy and unharmed,” Buchanan County Sheriff Bill Puett shared with reporters.

St. Joseph Police Detective Sergeant Jason Strong added that it can be difficult to distinguish whether a child custody situation constitutes an emergency situation, and warrants an AMBER Alert - but he is grateful the alert was issued.

“Being able to engage the public through media, and with alerts and billboards, it's very helpful,” said Strong. “Statistically, the longer that a child goes missing, the worse the outcome could be. So we want to get a child back as soon as possible.”

After each AMBER Alert, a review takes place on what worked and what can be improved to get a full perspective on the incident. Schoeneberg said they reached the conclusion the alert went to a broader area

than necessary, but overall the alert worked exactly as it should.

“This case highlights the role communications personnel, even when not directly involved in the investigation, can have on the notification process,” said Schoeneberg. “Time is such a critical component of any missing child, and communications personnel realized the circumstances may meet the criteria for an AMBER Alert. This decision saved precious minutes and expedited contact with AMBER Alert Program Coordinators.”

RECOGNITION FOR A JOB WELL DONE

On April 28, the Missouri State Highway Patrol honored the two communications operators for their roles in saving the child. Kristen Bartles said their training at the law enforcement academy was critical to their ability to act quickly.

“While I was down there, we had (Assistant Chief Paula Heckes) come to speak with my class, basically saying, in the event of any kind of possible alert, notify them immediately,” said Bartles.

Melanie Stallsworth said she is grateful communications operators are being recognized for their role in AMBER Alerts.

“You don't have to carry a gun, you don't have to be out in the field,” said Stallsworth. “You can still serve our public; you can still serve law enforcement and not be one of the guys on the front line.”

Looking back, Schoenberg said every AMBER Alert partner in Missouri has the same goal: “The motivation of all those involved is based on the fundamental duty to safeguard lives and protect the innocent.” ☺

FACES OF THE AMBER ALERT

Maryland AMBER Alert Co-coordinators team up to save abducted children

“Nothing is more rewarding than helping missing and endangered children”



Deborah Flory, Maryland State Police

Deborah Flory has been with the Maryland State Police since 1996. She is assigned to the Criminal Enforcement Division's (CED) Child Recovery Unit (CRU) as the AMBER Alert and Silver Alert Coordinator. Her assignment in CED began in 2003, and included the AMBER Alert program. The Child Recovery Unit (CRU) utilizes specialized computer skills and cell phone knowledge to track and locate critical missing and abducted

children in Maryland. Flory is also a member of the Federal Bureau of Investigation Crimes Against Children Task Force, Special Deputy - U.S. Marshal, with full federal authority focusing on trafficking of juveniles.

WHAT IS UNIQUE TO YOUR AMBER ALERT/MISSING PERSONS PROGRAM, AND WHAT DO YOU THINK MAKES IT SUCCESSFUL?

Our program is unique in the fact our unit has full authority to issue an AMBER Alert or Silver Alert. Most programs have a long chain of command or need an outside commission to issue. Our command staff has full trust in our process, which cuts out a lot of wasted time and delays when issuing the alert.

WHAT MOTIVATES YOU TO FIND MISSING AND ABDUCTED CHILDREN?

The family of the missing. Knowing this is the most critical time and can be the difference between life and death. That's what motivates me.

PLEASE SHARE DETAILS ABOUT YOUR MOST MEMORABLE SUCCESS STORY IN WORKING A MISSING CHILD CASE.

HOW DID THE AMBER ALERT SUPPORT THE OUTCOME? WHAT WERE THE MOST IMPORTANT LESSONS LEARNED?

The AMBER Alert program has made all our alerts memorable. The alert has worked to make a speedy return or resolution. No matter how much time is lost from the time the missing child is reported until the time a police department makes the AMBER Alert request, in most cases the suspect gets the alert and releases or returns the child.

HOW HAVE YOUR CAREER AND LIFE EXPERIENCES, INCLUDING YOUR WORK AS AN AMBER ALERT COORDINATOR, STRENGTHENED YOUR COMMITMENT TO HELPING ENDANGERED, MISSING AND ABDUCTED CHILDREN?

When I was assigned to CRU and the AMBER Alert program, I knew I wanted to finish my career here. Nothing is more rewarding than helping missing and endangered children.

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE HAPPEN WITH YOUR AMBER ALERT PROGRAM AND OTHER PROGRAMS IN THE FUTURE?

I would love to see a National AMBER Alert; the time needed to alert other states is too slow.

HOW HAS TRAINING HELPED YOU IN AMBER ALERT CASES?

I would like to think I have attended every missing persons training there is, and every time I learn something new. The technology training alone has helped in locating missing, technologically savvy kids.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO OTHER AMBER ALERT PARTNERS?

Streamline your process. Time is of the essence. ☺

AMBER ALERT INTERNATIONAL

Lawmakers in Netherlands want to keep AMBER Alert program instead of new system

A majority of parliamentary members in the Netherlands support keeping AMBER Alerts for child abduction notifications instead of adopting a new program called the Burgernet system. The lawmakers passed a motion in June 2021 to stop the change scheduled for July 22. Burgernet is being used by local police for suspects wanted in urgent criminal investigations and government officials say it is cheaper than the AMBER Alert program.

“AMBER Alert has been a success for years. It has enormous reach, great results and works internationally. There’s no reason to throw it away so abruptly,” said Joost Eerdmans, co-sponsor of the motion. 🍷

The Bahamas is closer to having a child abduction alert

The Bahamian government signed a contract in May 2021 with a technology company to help send a “Marco Alert,” which will be used in child abductions like an AMBER Alert. The alert is named after Marco Archer who was murdered after he went to buy candy in September 2011. “The billboards are only here in New Providence,” said Minister of National Security Marvin Dames. “This contract will give us the ability to communicate cross country via cell phone...” 🍷

Some Canadians worry emergency alerts for pandemic will decrease effectiveness of AMBER Alerts

Thousands of Alberta, Canada, residents are speaking out against using the emergency alert for COVID-19 health measures because it may cause people to stop paying attention to other emergencies like AMBER Alerts.

“I totally thought it was an AMBER Alert, I was panicked for whatever child was in danger and that was kind of my initial reaction to it,” said Kimberly Roy.

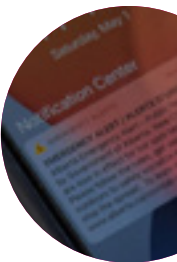
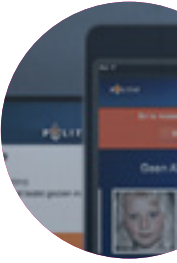
Government officials say the alerts are needed to prevent further spread of the virus during the worst pandemic in this lifetime. 🍷

British university to join international cold case project

The University of Winchester in Great Britain will have students help a network overseen by AMBER Alert Europe in its forensic investigations. The Police Expert Network on Missing Persons (PEN-MP) will work with the university and Locate International to analyze cold cases. 🍷

Canadian police receive threat over AMBER Alert

Law enforcement officials in Ontario, Canada, received an angry and threatening message after an AMBER Alert was issued for a missing 11-year-old. The child was found safe, but an expletive-filled message was sent to the Niagara Police Department’s social media inbox which took issue with the 4 a.m. alert. The department also received many messages of support in response to those who were angered by being awakened from the alert. 🍷



AMBER ALERT BRIEFS



VIRGINIA STARTS NEW ALERT SYSTEM FOR MISSING ADULTS WITH AUTISM; ADDS NEW PLATFORM FOR ALL ALERTS

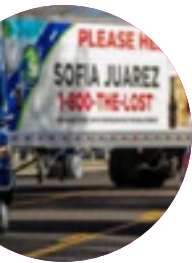
Virginia launched a new alert system on July 1, 2021, to be used when adults with autism go missing. Efforts to create the alert started after a 29-year-old woman with autism went missing and drowned in a swampy area a mile away from her home.

The Virginia State Police also began using a new communications platform to notify the public about the state's six different alerts. Virginia has an AMBER Alert, Senior Alert, Critically Missing Adult "Ashanti" Alert, Missing Child with Autism Alert, and the new alert for missing adults with autism. The platform is designed to get the key details out to the public more quickly. ↪



NCMEC BEGINS USING NEW TECHNOLOGY TO TIE AMBER ALERTS TO LICENSE PLATE READERS

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) has begun using a new operating system allowing Automated License Plate Recognition (ALPR) technology to be connected to AMBER Alert activations. NCMEC's joint effort with Flock Safety will use the company's machine-learning powered network to help law enforcement to find vehicles wanted during an alert. ↪



TIKTOK VIDEO OFFERS NEW CLUES IN 2003 KIDNAPPING OF WASHINGTON GIRL

Police officers in Kennewick, Washington, are investigating whether a viral TikTok video from Mexico shows a woman who was abducted nearly two decades ago shortly before her fifth birthday. The case remains open for Sofia Juarez, who was kidnapped on February 4, 2003, and sparked the state's first AMBER Alert. The video is less than a minute long and shows a woman who claims she was abducted but said she doesn't know where she's from. ↪



PHONE SCAM LEADS TO NEW HAMPSHIRE AMBER ALERT FOR CHILD WHO WAS NOT ABDUCTED

Police in Manchester, New Hampshire, said a "sophisticated phone scam" led to an AMBER Alert for a mother and child who were never in danger. The scammers tell the victim a family member is in trouble, demand a ransom and insist the victim doesn't hang up the phone so they can call for help. During these scams, officers are asking the public to use another device to text or email the family member to verify if they are safe. ↪



MENDOCINO COUNTY IN CALIFORNIA TESTS ALERT SYSTEM

Mendocino County, California, Office of Emergency Services conducted a test of the Wireless Emergency Alert (WEA) in May 2021 to identify weaknesses in the system. WEA is used to notify the public of AMBER Alerts and other emergencies like wildfires. The WEA went out to 90,000 people and included a hyperlink to MendoReady.org, a newly created website designed to be a comprehensive resource for residents regarding emergency information. ↪

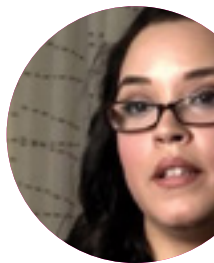
PRIVACY ADVOCATES SEEK TO LIMIT MASSACHUSETTS POLICE FROM USING LICENSE PLATE READERS

Civil liberties groups are asking Massachusetts lawmakers to limit when police use license plate readers so they can't be used for surveillance, dragnet monitoring or other civil rights harms. The Electronic Frontier Foundation said data collected from plate readers can be used to pry into people's private lives. Law enforcement groups say an outright ban on plate reading technology would compromise their work, including crucial cases like AMBER Alerts. [↪](#)



OHIO WOMAN WHO SURVIVED YEARS IN CAPTIVITY ASSISTS STATE'S AMBER ALERT PROGRAM

Gina DeJesus, a woman who was held against her will for 11 years, has partnered with the Northeast Ohio AMBER Alert Committee to assist families and law enforcement agencies. DeJesus's organization, the Cleveland Family Center for Missing Children, will offer support in cases involving missing or endangered children. DeJesus was 14 when she was abducted and held in a home with two other female teens. You can read more about her story of survival and advocacy efforts for missing children in the [June 2019 issue of The AMBER Advocate](#). [↪](#)



TENNESSEE'S NEW ALERT HELPS FIND MISSING ADULT

Tennessee used its new Endangered Child Alert to find a woman who was kidnapped in 2019. Daphne Westbrook was 18 when she was allegedly abducted by her non-custodial father; law enforcement determined the case didn't qualify for an AMBER Alert. The woman was found safe in Alabama in March 2021. Her father has since been indicted and charged with aggravated kidnapping. Tennessee recently passed the Holly Bobo Act which allows law enforcement to send alerts for endangered adults ages 18-20. [↪](#)



ARIZONA'S NEW LAW ALLOWS FOSTER AND HOMELESS YOUTH TO GET ID CARDS

Arizona will allow foster and homeless youth to obtain official documents to prove who they are - something that previously required getting permission from a parent or guardian. The law goes into effect in the fall and lets 16- and 17-year-olds apply for a state-issued identification card and certified birth certificate. Proponents say it will be helpful during AMBER Alerts and to protect the children from identity theft. [↪](#)



AMBER ALERT ON THE FRONT LINES:

Missing child notifications on the move: Washington semi-trucks feature girl who vanished 18 years ago



Two semi-trucks are now rolling down Washington roadways with images and information about a four-year-old girl who disappeared nearly two decades ago. The Washington State Patrol's Missing and Unidentified Missing Persons Unit teamed up with Kam-Way Transportation to place age-progressed photos of Sofia Juarez on two of its trucks.

The trucks are part of the Homeward Bound Program and were unveiled on February 4, 2021, 18 years to the day after Sofia went missing in Kennewick, Washington. The missing girl's family attended the event to showcase the truck trailers with the posters. "We plead with anybody (who) knows anything," said Victoria Juarez, Sofia's aunt. "Please just come forward and let that light shine in that dark area because this family needs closure."

Washington's first AMBER Alert was issued for Sofia. Her disappearance has been

featured on America's Most Wanted, the side of a NASCAR race car, Times Square in New York and with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. A special investigator is now reviewing more than 20,000 pages of documents and interviewing people again.

"It's been a long 18 years since Sofia was taken from her home and family," said Kennewick Police Chief Ken Hohenberg. "The Kennewick Police Department has never forgotten Sofia, nor will we."

The Homeward Bound Program started in 2006 with another trucking company and once featured 22 missing children. Kam-Way Transportation agreed to assume the program in 2018 after the other company was sold. This is the second child to be featured on Kam-Way trucks.

"The partnership will continue to expand in the coming months with the addition of several more missing children displayed on the side of the trailers," said Carri Gordon, Washington State AMBER Alert Coordinator and Missing Persons Clearinghouse Manager. "Kam-Way Transportation has committed to continuing to feature as many children as they are able, with the hopes of bringing them home to their families." 🍌

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