

THE AMBER ADVOCATE

Together Again

After two years of meeting virtually, hundreds gather for the 2023 AATTAP-AIIC National Symposium



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Together at Last

The 2023 National AMBER Alert Training and Technical Assistance Program and AMBER Alert in Indian Country Symposium—the first in-person event in two years—draws hundreds of law enforcement professionals to Tucson

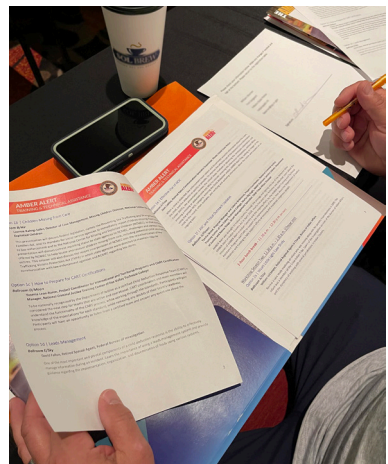
By Denise Gee Peacock

“It’s fitting, these images,” said Pascua Yaqui Tribal Councilman Francisco Munoz, pointing to a colorful depiction of Arizona life—one of many drawings by Salt River Elementary School students that wafted across a giant screen. “Children view the world totally different than we do—through magical eyes. And they need our assistance.”

Munoz was speaking to more than 150 law enforcement professionals who came from nearly every state in the nation—plus Puerto Rico and Mexico—to attend the 2023 AMBER Alert Training and Technical Assistance Program and AMBER Alert in Indian Country National Symposium.

The event, held April 19-20 at the Casino Del Sol Resort & Casino in Tucson, Arizona, was made possible by the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. To support robust participation, lodging scholarships were made available to Tribal participants with funding from the **McCain Institute**. And hospitality was provided to attendees by the resort’s owners, the **Pascua Yaqui Tribe**.

“Thank you for ensuring the safety and wellbeing of our nation’s children,” said



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OJJDP Associate Administrator Jim Antal. “Your job is not easy, but it’s a worthwhile one.”

The event marked the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic that law enforcement officers, AMBER Alert Coordinators, Missing Persons Clearinghouse Managers, Child Abduction Response Team (CART) leaders, and other key partners were able to meet in person for collaborative learning.

Attendees had their choice of 36 learning sessions presented by more than three dozen subject matter experts. They received updates from U.S. Attorney for the District of Arizona, **Gary N. Restaino**, whose Office works with 22 federally recognized Tribes (including the nation’s largest, the Navajo Nation). Participants also heard from **Marlys Big Eagle**, the DOJ’s first Native American Outreach Services Liaison —and a member of the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe of South Dakota.

What follows is an overview of key topics addressed at the event, with participants’ compelling thoughts about them.



We all know about the cases that have been solved, and the children who’ve been found, because of the relationships formed here.

Janell Rasmussen
AATTAP Administrator

Alerting and Investigating

NCIC entry is essential. “Nothing is more important than nationwide accessibility to essential and timely records about the event, the child, and the abductor. That’s why NCIC entry is **federally mandated**,” said AATTAP Region One Liaison Joan Collins, a law enforcement telecommunications expert who recently retired after three decades with the Rhode Island State Police.

Follow the leads management system. After conducting a live polling session via participants’ cell phones, retired FBI Special Agent David Fallon found that 73% of attendees had not used a leads management system. “Without one, you’ll be behind the eight ball,” he said. The best systems have a lead assignment log; lead sheet with the lead number; the date information was received and assigned; its priority; the assigned investigator; the information source; related task(s), completion(s), and their follow-up status.

“Don’t be in a homicide frame of mind.” That’s the important lesson



Program Manager Byron Fassett leads Region Four participants in a discussion about their state and regional alerting trends as well as their agencies' training and technology needs.

El Paso Police Department Sergeant David Camacho learned from Mike Simonds, the on-call sergeant (since retired) who investigated the Amber Hagerman case in 1996. "Race to safely recover the children in peril; then focus on justice for the perpetrator."

Ensure a recovered child returns to a safe environment. "Look at the big picture. How many 911 calls have come from the child's house, or domestic violence reports that mention the child?" said Cindy Neff, Missing Persons Clearinghouse Manager for the New York State Division of Criminal Services.

Neff shared an eight-question screening tool for use in beginning important conversations:

- >> What made you want to leave home?
- >> How long have you been away?
- >> Who have you been staying with?
- >> Did someone touch you?
- >> Do you have health issues?
- >> Has anyone hurt you or tried to hurt you while you were gone?
- >> Are you afraid for your safety or the safety of someone else?
- >> Do you have someone you can talk to at home or school?"

Child Abduction Response Teams

Having a CART is smart. "By being CART-certified, you're telling your community, the missing child's parents, even the nation, that your team is ready," said Yesenia "Jesi" Leon-Baron, AATTAP CART Certification Manager. She also oversees the Southern and Northern Border initiatives. "Training and certification make child recovery much more successful."

CARTs can deploy for any missing child incident—not only for abductions, which represent less than 1% of missing children, said Derek VanLuchene, AATTAP Coordinator for CART training.

CART training for Tribal law enforcement is a goal for many in Indian Country.

Symposium presentations and meetings focused on:

- Case studies involving endangered missing and abducted children, including cases from Tribal Nations and the U.S. Southern border with Mexico
- Best-practices for AMBER Alert and Endangered Missing Alert activations, with special attention paid to lesser-discussed but increasingly encountered types of missing child events, such as children of color, those missing from care, and youth with autism
- Child Abduction Response Team (CART) readiness and certification
- Essential and emerging technologies and tools
- Cultural sensitivities important for work in Indian Country
- Regional trends and training/technology issues
- The need for more and better wellness care for those whose work involves all the above

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Above left: AMBER Alert in Indian Country Technology Toolkits on display. Above right (from left): Yurok Tribal Prosecutors Rosemary Deck and Brie Bennett joined Yurok Tribal Police Chief Greg O'Rourke to discuss creative policy solutions for working in a PL280 state. "We take a trauma-informed approach to working with our people, and encourage other officers that work with Tribes to do the same," O'Rourke said.

Indian Country

Savanna's Act guidelines are being developed and implemented for use in missing and murdered Indigenous persons (MMIP) case protocols training, said U.S. Attorney for the District of Arizona Gary N. Restaino. After conducting listening sessions with the state's Tribes, Restaino and his team are focusing on respectfully preserving physical and cultural remains; involving a broader group of family members in investigation updates; and ensuring procedural due process.

AICC Technology Toolkits, launched in spring 2022 have been making their way to Tribal law enforcement agencies across the country. Funded by the U.S. DOJ and administered by the AICC, the kits provide an array of portable devices allowing Tribal officers to quickly communicate data involving missing children while working in remote



Marlys Big Eagle—the first Native American Outreach Services Liaison for the U.S. Department of Justice—speaks to Symposium attendees.

locations. And now, thanks to AICC's work with **FirstNet** (in partnership with AT&T), the toolkits include a Franklin A50 WiFi hotspot device and six months of free AT&T service. And \$75,000 has been allocated for select Tribes to receive additional toolkits.

PL280 challenges: Northern California's Yurok Tribe is a Public Law (PL) 280 state, one of only six in the nation that puts criminal jurisdiction solely in the hands of state, or federal law enforcement. "This hinders a Tribe's ability to directly respond to, or access data about, crimes that occur on their lands, such as abductions of Native American children or the sexual trafficking or exploitation of Tribal youth," said Yurok Tribal Prosecutor Brie Bennett. But the Tribe has found workarounds. It recently joined forces with the U.S. Marshals for an MMIP-focused initiative. (For more details, see page 19.)

Border/International Collaboration

Relationship building is key: El Paso Police Department Sergeant David Camacho

“Arizona is committed to talking more about implicit bias. We need to overcome any obstacles to getting the word out about missing children—and focus on rescuing them.”

Gary N. Restaino
U.S. Attorney for the District of Arizona



credits the strong partnership that Texas law enforcement and U.S. federal agencies have established with Mexican law enforcement and Mexico’s Office of the Attorney General, which oversees its Alerta AMBER. “We’ve established a healthy working relationship with Mexico when it comes to searching for U.S. citizens. “Their officers meet with us quarterly to bread together, and ensure contacts are current.”

So is swift communication: “Since many agencies can’t make international phone calls without permission, we’ve found the **WhatsApp** tool very helpful,” Comacho said. “You can plug in any number in the world and be instantly connected.”

Bias in Alerting Decisions

Re-thinking the term ‘runaway’: Chitimacha Tribal Police Captain Jada Breaux of Louisiana noted that children categorized as runaways “should be seen as 1) missing and 2) at risk of exploitation,” adding, “Chronic runaways often get lost in the system—or not even put into the system.” Program Manager Byron Fassett agreed: “I would argue that we should no longer even use the term.”

“A lot of officers think sex trafficking victims volunteered to be abused,” said Region Three Liaison Sarah Krebs-Qureshi. “They’ll say, ‘She was making good money,’ or ‘She’s an entrepreneur.’ And I’ll say, ‘No, she’s a victim. And even if she did get herself into a bind, it’s our responsibility to rescue her.”

Outreach and Understanding

Trust is earned: Black communities have a lot of mistrust about law enforcement, said Texas AAC Mike Nixon. That leads them to try to solve a missing child incident themselves—with parents calling their child’s friends, other family members, the child’s school, pastor, or barber to ask for help. “We need to take more initiative to get into these communities, build trust, and educate them about the need to act quickly so we can help recover their child safe.”

Be OK with discomfort: In working with Tribal or minority communities, “You will be uncomfortable constantly,” said North Dakota Highway Patrol Trooper Erin Quinn. “You’re showing up to meetings where you were not invited; to meetings where people will stare at you. You have to be outgoing enough to overcome that.”

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More than 150 Symposium participants from nearly every U.S. state, plus Puerto Rico and Mexico, enjoyed learning, networking, and socializing during the two-day event.

Wellbeing

Mental health counseling should be “like an annual physical, which no one questions the need for,” said one participant. Though symposium attendees believe things are changing for the better, unfortunately some command staff see an officer who asks for help as unfit for duty. “Truth is, all the terrible things we’ve seen never leave our heads,” said Texas Region 2 AAC John Graham. “But if someone mentions they’re struggling, it can be a career ender.”

This subject hits home, and hard, for one Symposium presenter. For Pete Bailey, the suicide of his Dallas Police Department partner

“**Recognize what causes you to be stressed, and your reactions to it. Are you going to be the one who suffers and holds everything in? Or are you going to say, ‘You know, I’m going to get control of this and get help.’”**

Pete Bailey

Law enforcement mental health expert and Dallas Police Department Sergeant (retired)

led the DPD Sergeant to earn a master’s degree in clinical mental health counseling after his retirement. “Everyone has different stress points; it’s important to be a ‘subject matter expert’ on yourself,” he said.

NCMEC Updates

Dr. John Bischoff, Vice President for the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children’s Missing Children Division (NCMEC), shared several alerting updates:

>> **A redesigned poster will soon launch.** Expect mobile design-friendly posters with bigger pictures and pared-down descriptive language; a QR code leading to their [website](#), with more details about the child (such as height, weight, and eye color; and ways to make the poster easier to share on social media. “We want to make it clear what we want the public to actually do,” Bischoff said.

>> **Watch for a streaming service.** NCMEC is working with Walmart and others to have large monitors prominently display digital posters of missing children updated in real-time.

Leemie Kahng-Sofer, NCMEC’s Director of Case Management, shared several reporting trends:

>> **Children missing from care** comprised more than 75% of total endangered runaway reports to NCMEC from 2018-2022, representing a 250% increase.



From left: Presenters Leemie Kahng-Sofer of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children; Minnesota law enforcement veteran Chad Museums; and Erin Quinn of the South Dakota Highway Patrol.

>> **Black and Native American children** are disproportionately over-represented among missing children reported to NCMEC compared to U.S. Census data. Of all the NCMEC Endangered Runaway intakes from 2016 to 2020, 31% of the children were Black, despite 14% of the U.S. population being Black; 1.5% of were Native American, though only .8% of the population is Native American;

and 10% were Multiracial, compared to 4% of U.S. Census representation.

>> **Regarding missing children with autism**, 2,496 cases were reported to NCMEC from 2013-2022, with 74% of them involving a male juvenile. And of those total cases, 3% were recovered deceased, with 83% of those deaths due to drowning.

Take 5: Tech-Savvy Takeaways

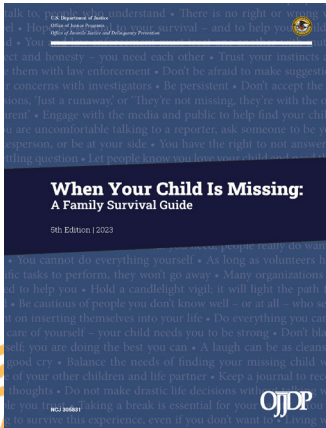
Consider five overlooked research tools and techniques to use when seeking a missing child or suspected abductor—shared during the Symposium by retired California Highway Patrol Sergeant/emergency alerting expert **Eddie Bertola**:

- 1 Information databases**, including LexisNexis Accruint, which offers a free phone number lookup tool and robust, multi-dimensional data for investigating people and companies (plus real-time alerts on specific subjects) and geolocation analysis; and credit score companies, which can tell you if someone has recently applied for a credit card or loan.
- 2 Vehicle manufacturers' support-software data** (e.g., OnStar, HondaLink). "Don't let OnStar tell you they can't find a vehicle because the owner hasn't paid for a subscription. They can find it," Bertola said. "Keep asking." The vehicle's insurer and lienholder may also be able to provide assistance.

- 3 Subscription-based music/news streaming services** such as Sirius XM, which can track a vehicle even if the owner does not subscribe to the service—using the embedded technology to do so.
- 4 Non-traditional banking companies** (Venmo, Apple Pay, PayPal). "Unlike when people pay with cash, the use of these services leaves digital trails," he said.
- 5 Businesses' facial recognition software** used by Walmart, McDonald's, Walgreens, Starbucks, and many others, to tailor advertisements in real-time to customers near to, or visiting, their stores.

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Symposium-goers get preview of new *Family Survival Guide*



Interact with and download the new edition of the *Guide*: AMBERAdvocate.org/families

An updated, multimedia fifth edition of the U.S.

Department of Justice resource, *When Your Child Is Missing: A Family Survival Guide*, was announced on Missing Children's Day, held on May 24, 2023, in Washington, DC. But during the Symposium, participants were shown a video of the *Guide's* parent-contributors, who spoke about the unparalleled power of the resource.

"This *Guide* is critical to the work each of you do in the field," AATTAP Administrator Janell Rasmussen told attendees. "When you're working with families, it's nice to give them a resource explaining what they can expect, and what they do, to help in the search for their missing child."

"I believe the *Family Survival Guide* is one of the most critical resources ever developed by the Department of Justice.

Ron Laney
OJJDP/NCMEC/
AMBER Alert veteran

Symposium participants also heard from a legend in the field of child protection: Ron Laney, a retired OJJDP veteran who was not only instrumental in creating the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC), but also the national AMBER Alert initiative.

Laney helped create the first edition of the *Guide* in 1998 by teaming up with Helen Connelly (retired FVTC Program Administrator and current NCJTC Associate) and a small



Dr. Noelle Hunter (front left) thanks fellow advocate for missing children, Jeffery Morehouse, for being a dear friend. All of the parents who worked on the *Guide* have formed strong bonds with each other. Their message to parents of missing children: "You are not alone."

group of dedicated parents, including Patty Wetterling and Colleen Nick, who contributed to the new fifth edition.

The original *Guide* was the first of its kind, offering clear, actionable information on how parents of missing children could work with law enforcement, the media, and volunteers; manage donations and rewards; and simply survive to fight another day in the search for their child. It became a go-to source for parents needing guidance and strength.

The *Guide's* new iteration, which has been peer-reviewed by leading law enforcement experts and child/victim advocates, will build on that legacy by offering updated, easy to navigate actionable advice in both print and online formats.

Look for a full-length feature about the *Family Survival Guide* to appear in the next issue of *The AMBER Advocate*.

ON THE FRONT LINES



Out of the Woods

A toddler is found safe 24 hours after getting lost in a thicket 'where not many adults would want to be overnight.' Hundreds of law enforcement officers and community volunteers, aided by a novel app, joined the search.

By Rebecca Sherman

On the morning of February 23, 2023, toddler Joshua "JJ" Rowland was fast asleep. His grandmother, who had been caring for him, dropped him off at his parents' house at 9:45 a.m. With JJ's mother still asleep, his grandmother quietly placed the drowsy boy in his bed. And all was quiet when she left. But that peace would be broken within an hour, when JJ's mother awoke to find the front door open, the family dogs in the front yard, and her son nowhere to be found.

JJ's mother began a frantic search of their property in Brooksville, Florida.

The Rowland home sits on an expanse of land surrounded by dense areas of trees and brush that characterize this rural region of west-central Florida. The land also has a

deep pond, plus barns and sheds—all potential hazards and hiding spots for their lost 2-year-old. After an hour of searching for JJ, his mother called 911.

Hernando County Sheriff's Office (HCSO) deputies arrived and quickly combed the area for the blond curly haired toddler who was wearing a Batman T-shirt and space-themed pajama pants. A witness reported seeing JJ playing in his front yard at 10:40 a.m., but he had not been seen since.

By this point, JJ had been missing for nearly an hour. And time was not anyone's side.

Above: Law enforcement vehicles line the area near where Joshua "JJ" Rowland went missing. Volunteer Ray Link found the toddler and carried him to safety. Photos: Tampa Bay10

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“This is an invaluable example of having a Child Abduction Response Team. When a CART was deployed to help find JJ, they knew what their roles would be going into the situation. The operation worked seamlessly. The CART team, the Hernando County Sheriff’s Office, and all the volunteers should be commended for their swift, coordinated, multifaceted response.”

Derek VanLuchene
AATTAP CART Program Coordinator

As a search operation got underway, law enforcement began canvassing the area. They interviewed family members and neighbors, and contacted registered sex offenders in the area, all of whom gave permission for their homes to be searched. But after five hours, there was still no sign of the toddler.

“As of now, we have no indication [whether] he was abducted, or if he just wandered

off,” Hernando County Sheriff Al Nienhuis said during a roadside press conference near the Rowland home. “We’ve been scouring the woods with bloodhounds and our K-9s. Deputies have been coming back just covered in sand spurs looking for little JJ.”

Nienhuis described JJ as a “rambunctious” child and more mature than his age would indicate. “He might have gotten farther away than we might anticipate, and [may be] hiding in someone’s shed or garage,” he said, acknowledging that chances for a positive outcome were dwindling as the hours passed. “Our hope is to find him alive and well.”

A massive search and rescue effort involved nearly 100 law enforcement officers from area agencies, including sheriff’s deputies from four nearby counties, members of the state’s Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Highway Patrol, Department of Corrections, and Probation and Parole.

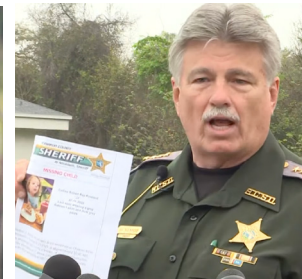
Due to the vast and complex terrain involved, specialized search and rescue operations were deployed to thoroughly examine woods and water using drones, K-9 units, horseback patrols, dive teams, and all-terrain vehicles.



Map My Tracks App Shares Progress of SAR Volunteers

The Hernando County Sheriff’s Office encouraged community volunteers to track their searches using the smartphone app Map My Tracks. It uses GPS tracking technology to transmit a topographic map of the search area, with aerial views, that can be shared with law enforcement monitoring the search zones. It also allows searchers to plan routes and save their tracks and waypoints.

Not everyone, however, used the apps. And some volunteers unfamiliar with the terrain ran into trouble. “There were a couple of instances on Friday morning where volunteers needed assistance getting out of the search area,” Sheriff Nienhuis said. Thankfully, there’s an app for that. For more details, visit MapMyTracks.com.



Above and above center: A well-trained Child Abduction Response Team joined about 100 law enforcement officers from around the region to search the area's high grass, dense woods, numerous bodies of water in the search for JJ.

Above right, top: Sheriff Al Nienhuis shows JJ's missing poster and discusses the Map My Tracks App at a news conference.

Right: A map showing where JJ was reported missing and the approximate area where he was found the next morning. Photos: WTSP



"It's a difficult area to search," Nienhuis told a gathering of reporters. "The woods make it difficult to see even a few feet—the grass is so high—and JJ is so small."

At 6 p.m., as daylight faded and spirits waned, a statewide **Enhanced Missing Child Alert** was issued. Within hours the ground search for JJ would be called off due to darkness, but Hernando County deputies continued their desperate quest to find the boy from the air, using helicopters and drones equipped with heat-sensing infrared cameras. Then fog rolled in, hindering the air search. The long night ended without locating JJ.

At dawn the next day, nearly 100 Child Abduction Response Team (CART) members from five agencies arrived on the scene to assist. An amazing 500 volunteers also joined the search, led by a Volunteer Coordinator from the Hernando County Sheriff's Office (HCSO). Thanks to the voracity of the first day's efforts, and the swift and comprehensive response with vast resources enlisted on day two, all those involved in the physically taxing search would see their efforts rewarded.

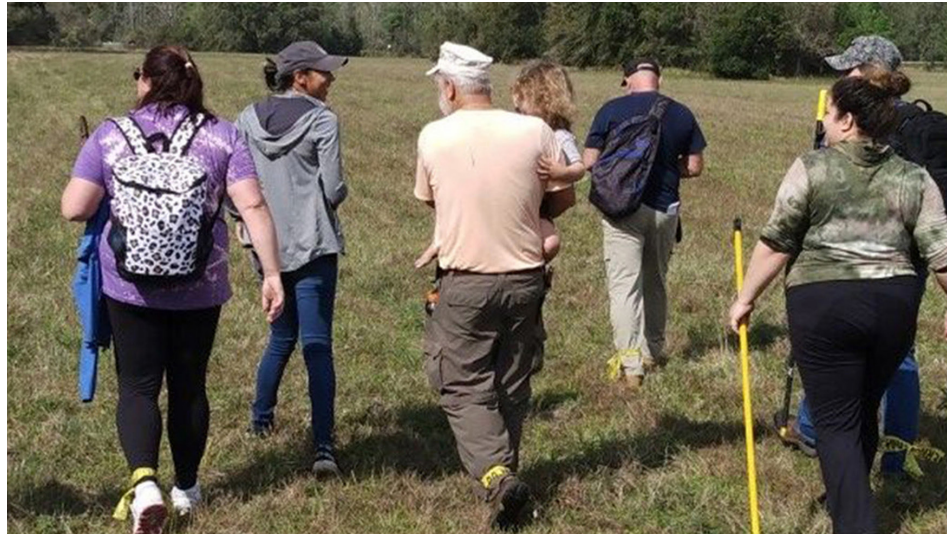
Volunteer Roy Lick was well-suited for the task at hand. The former U.S. Marine and retired Hernando County Parks Department

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'Hey, I found him!'

Hear Roy Link's 911 call, courtesy Fox13 Tampa Bay: bit.ly/Link911Call



Above: Link carries JJ out of the woods alongside a community search team.

Left: Volunteers and the team that located the toddler react to his safe recovery. More than 500 volunteers ultimately assisted in the search, prompting the HCSO to announce that no more volunteers were needed. Photos: WTSP

employee knows the area well, so when volunteers were needed in the search for JJ, he answered the call. His pre-planned fishing trip would have to wait.

By now it was about 11 a.m.—some 24 hours after JJ had disappeared. Link was crossing a field about a half-mile behind the boy's house when he heard a soft whimpering. Link followed the sound about 100 feet into the woods. He then spotted JJ's curly blond head. Standing barefoot in briars and covered in bug bites and scratches, the boy instantly held out his arms to be picked up. Link obliged.

"He then started hollering for his mom," Link told local reporters. "I kept telling him, 'Your mama's comin', your mama's comin'."

Everyone involved in the search was elated to hear JJ had survived the 24-hour ordeal with only minor injuries. "Not many adults would want to be in that place at night ... where who knows what's out there? We have coyotes and other wild animals," Link said.

Sheriff Nienhuis noted that JJ had crossed a residential road behind his house and crawled through barbed wire fences, "which was extremely unusual and unanticipated."

After JJ was given water and treated by EMS for cuts and scrapes, he was reunited with his family—while the community cheered.

"I've got to admit, I'm a little emotional. I thought we were going to have bad news," Nienhuis told reporters. "It's a very good day in Hernando County."

FACES OF THE AMBER ALERT

Mission Critical Work

Embracing technology to find missing children drives First Sergeant James Kozik to excel in his job. He wants others to follow his lead.

By Rebecca Sherman

West Virginia State Police First Sergeant James Kozik is known nationwide for his expertise in using technology to fight crimes against children. But getting to this high point in his career—serving as the state’s Crimes Against Children (CAC) Unit Director and Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) Task Force Commander—has been a path as winding as West Virginia’s mountain roads.

Internet child exploitation cases first began popping up in 2006, while Kozik was working narcotics and financial crimes for the WVSP’s Bureau of Criminal Investigations. “We were caught off guard here,” says Kozik, who, like most law enforcement 20 years ago, knew very little about the Internet. West Virginia’s lone pioneer in digital forensics at the time would give him the initial training he needed to investigate ICAC cases.

A year later, Kozik’s department received its first ICAC grant, and he became the unit’s alternate commander. “At the same time, the state was seeing cases involving hands-on offenses against children fall through the cracks, so we formed a separate unit of investigators,” focusing on real-world



First Sergeant James Kozik

legwork and fact-finding, he recalls. In 2009, the new unit joined forces with the national ICAC Task Force. Then other programs were added, such as the state’s AMBER Alert Plan, Missing Child Clearinghouse, and National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) collaboration.

As an investigator, training coordinator, and digital forensic analyst, Kozik helped build West Virginia’s first comprehensive CAC Unit, now an exemplary program modeled throughout the nation. He was named its Director in 2017. “We became an all-inclusive one stop: If it’s [a crime] against a kid, you come to us,” says Kozik, whose team includes 11 WVSP investigators. In this role, he wears many hats, including coordinating the state’s AMBER Alert and Blue Alert networks as well as leading the state’s ICAC Task Force and the Missing Child Clearinghouse.

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Though he no longer investigates cases himself, Kozik works closely with law enforcement agencies throughout West Virginia when a child goes missing. “I’m the one who gets called in the middle of the night to find out whether an AMBER Alert can be activated or not,” he says. He also triages cases from NCMEC, a heartbreaking job sometimes requiring him to watch unspeakable videos of child abuse. “I just want to reach through the screen and help those kids,” he says.

Under Kozik’s leadership, West Virginia now has one of the country’s top ICAC Task Force Units. In 2012, he developed the first ICAC Data System, a website allowing thousands of registered law enforcement users to quickly and efficiently access and transfer cases, information, and tips. As the database’s ongoing project manager, Kozik has trained ICAC commanders and other law enforcement around the country to use it, including the Los Angeles Police Department.

In addition to two decades of on-the-job experience and a Bachelor of Science degree in criminal justice, Kozik has hundreds of hours of training in digital forensics and child exploitation. A highly regarded expert, he is often called upon to testify in state and federal prosecutions.

Fast-changing and complex, technology remains an important weapon in Kozik’s crime-solving arsenal, especially when it comes to finding missing and endangered children. “Technology is incredibly useful in locating kids. I can put out an AMBER Alert and Facebook will splash it on every user’s [page] in West Virginia. I can reach a lot more people that way,” he says. Conversely, “Technology is also a curse.” Social media often puts vulnerable kids

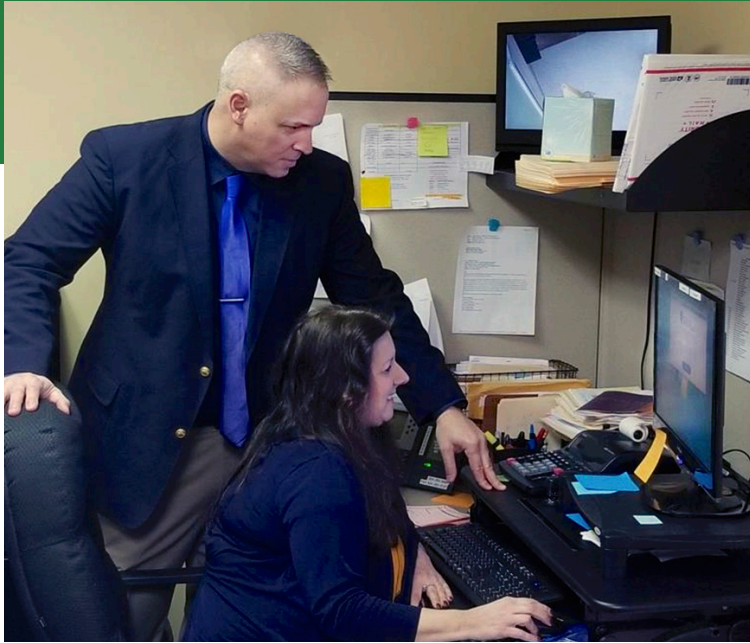
at risk of serious harm by “friends” they meet on TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram, and gaming voice and messaging platforms (Discord, Google Hangouts, and others).

These days, abductions by strangers are less common. On the rise are cases involving kids lured from home by adults they’ve met on the Internet—encounters that happen in secret, but often in plain sight of their parents. “We often don’t know about it until the child doesn’t show up for dinner, or a parent finds something suspicious on their child’s cellphone,” he says.

While technology can be to blame for a child’s disappearance, it also can play a pivotal role in locating the child quickly—even before an AMBER Alert or Missing and Endangered Child Alert is issued. That involves local law enforcement pinging the child’s phone to find his or her location. This can be done with permission from a parent or guardian using a device-locating program or other app installed on the child’s phone. In some instances, a court order is needed. “A lot of crimes, not just AMBER Alerts, can be solved with technological tools,” he says. “I wish more law enforcement were trained on how to use them.”

To preserve the efficacy of AMBER Alerts—which for 27 years have been a powerful tool for alerting the public to an abducted child in peril—Kozik carefully evaluates each potential case to ensure it meets the state’s activation criteria. “If it doesn’t, I don’t put out an alert,” he says. “If you keep lighting up cell phones with unwarranted AMBER Alerts, people shut them off and they’re no longer effective.”

One complication Kozik routinely faces are requests from law enforcement agencies, even judges, who ask that AMBER Alerts



“A lot of crimes, not just AMBER Alerts, can be solved with technological tools. I just wish more law enforcement were trained on how to use them.”

James Kozik
First Sergeant
West Virginia State Police

be issued on behalf of Child Protective Services (CPS). This occurs when a legal or non-custodial parent being monitored by CPS has taken a child to an unknown location, but is not thought to pose a serious threat to the child's safety. CPS often cites the parent's past or current drug use, or impoverished status, as the reason for the child's endangerment—but Kozik isn't convinced. “A lot of people in West Virginia get caught up in drugs, and unfortunately don't make the best decisions, but that doesn't mean they will harm their kids,” he says. Thus, if law enforcement hasn't issued an arrest warrant for kidnapping, and no imminent serious bodily danger is posed, Kozik will not activate an AMBER Alert.

Kozik urges law enforcement to use other investigative techniques besides AMBER Alerts or Endangered Missing Advisories to address the situation rapidly. One way is by locating the parent's car using license plate readers throughout the state. Another is tracking the missing parent and child via any cellphone(s) they may have. “Tracking their phones is easily done with an emergency court order, and does yield results, but police often don't know they can do this,” Kozik says. He encourages all state law enforcement to just pick up the phone and call him if they are unclear on how to respond to a missing child incident,

especially since a case remains fluid until it is solved. “A situation might not initially qualify as an AMBER Alert, but an hour later it might,” he says. “In the meantime, there are lots of other investigative techniques that can be tried.”

Technology is essential to combat crimes against children, but significant barriers often prevent it from being implemented. “A lot of older officers never think about the homing devices we all carry in our pockets or vehicles,” Kozik explains. “But as younger officers come on board who know technology, things will change.” Yet, even that hopeful thought faces a barrier. Younger recruits aren't clamoring to become police officers, he notes. Bad publicity stemming from high profile police brutality cases in recent years could be to blame, he says. “We're barely able to fill police cadet classes,” Kozik says. “Every agency in America is having a manpower shortage.”

There's no easy answer to that dilemma, and even as Kozik is set to retire within two years, he wants to be as helpful as he can for as long as he can to make a difference.

“I'm passionate about my job. If I don't do it, no one else will,” he says. “That's what gets me going in the mornings.”

AMBER ALERT UNITED STATES

NCMEC's new 'Take It Down' tool helps remove explicit web imagery of children

"Take It Down," a free online service run by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), is helping remove sexually explicit images or videos depicting children under age 18. And NCMEC's work is paying off: Since "Take It Down" launched in December 2022, more than 200 cases have been resolved. The process works by assigning a unique digital fingerprint, or hash value, to specific images or videos. Participating tech platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, Pornhub, and OnlyFans, use the hash values to detect and remove the disturbing imagery from their sites. Individuals also can submit a request to remove explicit visual content.



New Utah law aims to improve (over)use of AMBER Alerts

A new state law in Utah—designed to improve the criteria for issuing AMBER Alerts—went into effect May 3. Representative Ryan Wilcox of Ogden sponsored **HB266** which prohibits law enforcement from issuing AMBER Alerts for runaways or child custody disputes unless the child faces a credible threat of imminent danger. Wilcox **told** KSL.com that the overuse of AMBER Alerts has caused people to opt out of receiving the alerts or ignore them, which diminishes their effectiveness. Utah Governor Spencer Cox signed the bill into law in March.



'Ebony Alert' seeks to end racial disparity in missing person cases

Black Americans go missing at a **disproportionate rate** compared to other races in the U.S., and California lawmakers want to address that disparity. New legislation would allow an "**Ebony Alert**" for missing Black women and children ages 12 to 25. Proponents of the legislation say this will put a face on missing Black children, who are often classified as runaways and don't fit criteria for an AMBER Alert.



Texas lawmakers pass 'Athena Alert' bill to create localized version of an AMBER Alert

In May 2023, Texas lawmakers approved **HB3556**, which would allow law enforcement to immediately notify people within a 100-mile radius as soon as a child goes missing. The "Athena Alert" bill is named for 7-year-old **Athena Strand**, who was kidnapped and killed last year by a FedEx driver who made a delivery to her Wise County home. The bill aims to close the gap between when a child is reported missing and when the child's case meets state criteria for an AMBER Alert (for a confirmed abduction). The bill awaits Governor Greg Abbott's signature into law.



AMBER ALERT INTERNATIONAL

Ukrainian girl who vanished at start of war is one of thousands now missing

On March 3, 2022, 15-year-old Arina Yatsiuk and her family were trying to evacuate from Ukraine when Russian troops killed her parents and yanked her from their car. Now, the Ukrainian teen is the face of an alarming fallout from Russia's invasion: She's among thousands of Ukrainian children who have **vanished**. Ukrainian officials believe Russia has forcibly deported children and is attempting to "Russify" them. (And Ukraine's Children's Rights Commissioner reports more than 16,000 known cases of children who have been forcibly deported.) Some of the children are reportedly held in camps to be politically re-educated; others are put in institutions or orphanages, or quickly adopted and given citizenship, even as relatives search for them. Ukraine's government, which is seeking help from the international community, has secured the return of about 300 children so far. Arina's relatives remain hopeful. "We all believe she is alive, and we will soon find her," said her aunt. "We are considering all options, including that she might have been adopted."



Canadian police credit AMBER Alerts for helping saving children's lives

The Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) **report** that more than 90 percent of AMBER Alerts in Canada's most populous province have resulted in the safe recovery of the missing child. The OPP has issued 21 Alerts since 2018, an average of about four a year. In noting the effectiveness of the program, the OPP credits the public with being the eyes and ears in the safe recovery of children. They also urge people to be vigilant in checking AMBER Alerts and reporting incidents, even if they may seem insignificant. "Without your help, we might be reporting very different statistics today," a department official said.



EU wants big-tech accountability in keeping children safe online

Fourteen European organizations have teamed up on a new **campaign** to help stop online child sex abuse and exploitation. The "Right in Front of Us" (#ChildSafetyOn) initiative aims to spread awareness of and seek support for legislation that would bring **accountability** to large tech companies such as Meta, Google, and TikTok. Under a new law the European Union is considering, the tech companies would be required to identify, remove, and report any child sexual abuse material on their platforms. "The proposed legislation is necessary and urgent to prevent and combat child sexual exploitation such as grooming," said Anna Maria Corazza Bildt, president of Missing Children Europe. In addition to working with teachers and educators to strengthen the message, the campaign includes a website (childsafetyineurope.com) with videos and a petition supporting the proposed legislation.

