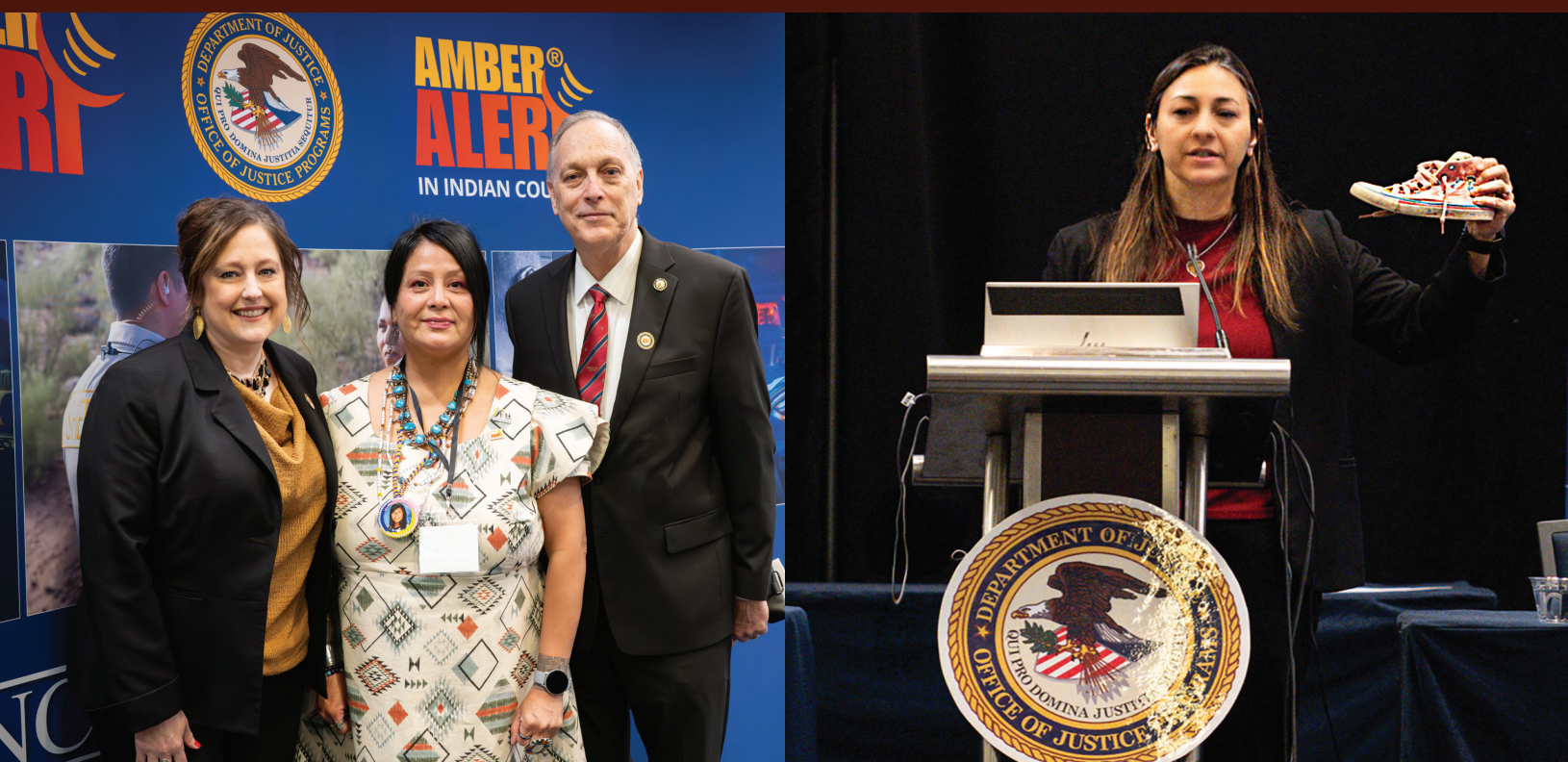


THE AMBER ADVOCATE



'Advocates, Protectors & Innovators'

Hundreds of professionals dedicated to finding missing children traveled to Washington, D.C.—from as far away as American Samoa—to fortify their minds and missions at the **2025 National AMBER Alert Symposium**.



**AMBER
ALERT**



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EDITORS' NOTES



In the print edition, words and phrases in **bold purple** denote hyperlinks for content sources and additional details. To interact with hyperlinks, visit AMBERAdvocate.org to download a PDF of current and past issues.



Have a story idea for us? We'd love to hear from you. Email askamber@fvtc.edu.

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Team **AMBER** 2025

Child protection professionals from the U.S. and its territories—even as far away as American Samoa—traveled to Washington, D.C., to fortify their minds and missions at the 2025 National AMBER Alert Symposium.

By Denise Gee Peacock

The 2025 National AMBER Alert and AMBER Alert in Indian Country Symposium, held February 25-26 in Washington, D.C., brought together nearly 200 state and regional AMBER Alert coordinators, missing person clearinghouse managers, Tribal leaders, and public safety officials from across the U.S. and its territories, including American Samoa, Guam, and Puerto Rico.

Presenters and speakers included more than two dozen subject matter experts in missing child investigations and rapid response teams, emergency alerting, law enforcement technology, and Tribal law enforcement. Special guests included four family survivors who shared their powerful stories—and lessons learned. Also there to address participants was Eileen Garry, Acting Administrator of the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and U.S. Representative Andy Biggs of Arizona's 5th Congressional District and co-sponsor of the Ashlynne Mike AMBER Alert in Indian Country Act of 2018.

The annual collaborative learning event is funded by the DOJ's Office of Justice Programs and administered by the AMBER Alert Training & Technical Assistance Program (AATTAP) and its AMBER Alert in Indian Country (AIIIC) initiative, both affiliated with the National Criminal Justice Training Center (NCJTC) of Fox Valley Technical College.



Retired New York State Police Investigator Sayeh Rivazfar holds up one of the Punky Brewster tennis shoes she had on during a horrific 1988 assault on her and her younger sister, Sara (shown with her on right).



Paying it forward

Sayeh Rivazfar displayed a shadow box that belonged to Santa Rosa County (Florida) Sheriff's Office Deputy Randy Mitchell (*seen with her below*). When assigned to her case, the new father was outraged over the pain inflicted on her and her sister. He and Rivazfar kept in touch over the years. "He was proud of my law enforcement career," she said. Then, in 2012, shortly before he died of cancer, she received a package from him—his "career in a box," including his badge and shield, plus a moving letter. "It means the world to me, as he did."



The symposium's goal is to engage participants in discussing current issues, emerging technology, and best practices for recovering endangered missing and abducted children. Another objective is to improve the process of integration between state, regional, and rural communication plans with federally recognized Tribes from across the nation.

For the second year the AATTAP enlisted the event management app Whova to help attendees plan their days, share thoughts, and connect with each other. In keeping with that, participants' thoughts are woven into the symposium highlights that follow.

LEARN FROM SURVIVORS

"Sayeh is an incredible mother, an incredible warrior. Hearing her story was captivating, humbling, and gut-wrenching. As a mother of two young boys, I found her story beyond impactful. It provided a tangible sense of just how urgent it was to return home and continue the work."

Kelsey Commisso, Alerts Coordinator, Arizona Department of Public Safety

Sayeh Rivazfar's life was forever changed on September 22, 1988. That was when her mother's boyfriend took her, then age 8, and her 6-year-old sister, Sara,



NCJTC Director/AATTAP Administrator Janell Rasmussen welcomes attendees alongside Acting OJJDP Administrator Eileen Garry and keynote speaker Sayeh Rivazfar.

from their home in Pensacola, Florida, drove them to a remote area, brutally assaulted them, slashed their throats, and left them to die. Sayeh survived; her sister did not.

While living with her father and brother in Rochester, New York, Sayeh chose to join the New York State Police. She has since retired after two decades' work, but her child protection work continues. "I decided early on not to let trauma take me down," she said. "I use it as fuel to help others."

MARSHALING MORE SUPPORT

"We're good at hunting down fugitives. We're now putting that toward finding missing children. It's not something we're known for. But we want to focus our efforts on kids with the highest likelihood of being victimized, or facing violence."

Bill Boldin, Senior Inspector/National Missing Child Program Coordinator, U.S. Marshals Service (USMS), *shown at right*

Proven track record: From 2021 to 2024, 61% of missing child cases were resolved within seven days of USMS assistance.





Dr. Noelle Hunter

'ALL ABDUCTIONS ARE LOCAL'

On New Year's Day 2011, Dr. Noelle Hunter's worst fear was realized: Her ex-husband had illegally taken their 4-year-old daughter to live in his home country of Mali, West Africa. Thus began the college professor's quest to have Maayimuna ("Muna") returned to her—after nearly three years of “full-court press” work—and her mission to help others navigate the complex mire of international parental child abduction (IPCA). As an AATTAP/NCJTC Associate, she now helps law enforcement understand how to best respond to IPCA cases. [Learn more about Dr. Hunter's story here.](#)



WEB EXTRA: Check out our [online version](#) of this feature at AMBERAdvocate.org to find additional content and photos!

2025 Symposium Overview

The symposium featured 28 presentations and workshops on relevant and pressing topics within child protection—each meant to deepen attendees' understanding of current challenges and solutions. Click [here](#) to see the full agenda and [here](#) to read the speakers' bios.

FAMILY PERSPECTIVES

- **Pamela Foster:** Keynote speaker (parental/ AMBER Alert in Indian Country focus)
- **Sayeh Rivazfar:** Keynote speaker (abduction survivor/law enforcement focus)
- **Dr. Noelle Hunter:** Presenter (international parental child abduction focus)
- **Desiree Young:** Presenter (parental focus)



INVESTIGATIONS / RESOURCES

- AMBER Alert Coordination: Essential Resources
- Missing Persons Clearinghouse Managers
- National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) Updates
- Search Methods in Tribal Communities
- Tribal Response to Missing Children
- U.S. Marshals Service Support for Missing Children

CASE STUDIES

- “Baby in a Box” (Shannon Dedrick / Florida)
- CART Response to Child Sex Trafficking (New Jersey)
- Charlotte Sena Campground Abduction (New York)
- Gila River Indian Community (Arizona)

ALERTING / TECHNOLOGY

- AMBER Alerts: To Activate or Not Activate?
- FirstNet Authority Updates/Resources (Indian Country)
- IPAWS Emergency Communications Updates
- Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) Analysis

CHILD ABDUCTION RESPONSE TEAMS (CARTs)

- Pasco County, Florida
- State of New Jersey

“This conference is a testament to the power of collaboration. We're here to bridge gaps, to share best practices, and to innovate. We're here to hear the voices of those who've experienced the unimaginable—to honor their strength and their resilience. **Janell Rasmussen**
NCJTC Director and AATTAP Administrator

'INDIAN COUNTRY NEEDS AMBER ALERT'



“Those of you in Tribal law enforcement, if you haven't already received training, please schedule it as soon as possible.

Pamela Foster, keynote speaker and mother of **Ashlynnne Mike** (2004–2016), shown above

Throughout the symposium, Indian Country discussions primarily centered on the need for training, technology, and collaboration.

One workshop led by the Phoenix-area Gila River Police Department (GRPD) focused on a child abduction case in 2024, which occurred shortly after the GRPD had its first AMBER Alert in Indian Country implementation meeting and child abduction tabletop exercise (CATE).

Thanks to the scenario-based primer, following the missing child report, the GRPD was immediately able to activate resources, connect with partnering law enforcement agencies, and coordinate the successful response.



“I will continue to push forward and spread awareness, particularly about Indian Country, hoping that one day jurisdiction and sovereignty will not play a role in the search for a child. And that every Tribe will have a plan in place if an AMBER Alert ever has to be activated.

Jada Breaux, Captain, Chitimacha Tribal Police Department, Louisiana

Pamela Foster served as keynote speaker. Her daughter, Ashlynnne Mike, was abducted and murdered on the Navajo Nation reservation in 2016. In introducing Foster to attendees, Congressman Biggs said, “Not long after arriving in D.C., I met with her and learned of her tragedy. We decided to work together and try to turn her loss into something positive, something that addressed the specific needs of Tribal communities.”

Working with Foster, and U.S. Senator John McCain, Biggs helped champion passage of the **Ashlynnne Mike AMBER**



Ashlynnne Mike's mother, Pamela Foster, center, stands with U.S. Representative Andy Biggs of Arizona and Janell Rasmussen, NCJTC Director/AATTAP Administrator.

Alert in Indian Country Act of 2018, which provides training and tools for Tribes to best respond if a child goes missing. Foster's powerful presentation is excerpted here.

You are all advocates, protectors, and innovators. And we are here to work on behalf of two beautiful little girls who tragically lost their lives: my daughter, 11-year-old Ashlynnne Mike, and 9-year-old Amber Hagerman, namesake of the AMBER Alert program.

“AMBER Alert and Ashlynnne's Law both save lives. Thank you for ensuring your communities are prepared to respond to every parent's worst nightmare.

U.S. Representative

Andy Biggs, Arizona's 5th District





GIFTED MOMENT

Knowing that Pamela Foster's daughter, Ashlynn Mike, loved butterflies, NCJTC Director/AATTAP Administrator Janell Rasmussen presented Foster with a sterling silver necklace featuring a butterfly with Ashlynn's name intricately cut into its wings. The necklace was crafted by AATTAP/AIIC Project Coordinator Alica Murphy Wildcatt, a member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. The moment brought Foster to tears.

In the wake of my daughter's abduction and murder in 2016, I found out that our Navajo Nation, and other Tribes across the country, did not have the most recognized public safety tool, the AMBER Alert—the cornerstone of communication to protect our children. Thus, the resources needed to quickly search for Ashlynn were unavailable. That was tragic. ...

We need law enforcement on Tribal land to share information with outside agencies so they can quickly apprehend criminals. Every child has the right to feel safe and live life to its fullest, and my fight is based on what I have experienced as a mother and a parent. I don't ever want what happened to me to happen to another person. Indian Country needs AMBER Alert.

MODEL CARTs

“**Mandates are pathways to support.** **Stacie Lick**, Captain (Ret.), Gloucester County (New Jersey) Prosecutor's Office

Having a dedicated, well-trained child abduction response team (CART) is essential to finding a missing child, using all available resources, when every minute counts. But symposium-goers know that building and sustaining a CART poses significant obstacles for agencies with slim staffs and budgets.

CART experts from New Jersey and Florida shared advice for thinking creatively and strategically, such as getting buy-in for New Jersey's expansion of state CARTs after the high-profile Autumn Pasquale **case** in 2012, or by having a well-thought-through staffing and resource plan that can be applied multi-jurisdictionally.

As a result of retired Captain Stacie Lick's efforts to compile CART best practices for Gloucester County, New Jersey now **mandates** that all 21 of its counties have an active CART that follows standardized policies and procedures, and learns from mandatory after-action reporting.

In 2008, as Lick was building Gloucester County's CART, she was greatly inspired by the Pasco County, Florida, Sheriff's Office (PCSO) Missing Abducted Child (**MAC**) Team. Each MAC Team deploys with a command post that has a lead investigator assigned to it. It also has coordinators designated to oversee these critical tasks: leads management; neighborhood/business canvassing and roadblocks; sex offender canvassing; resources oversight; volunteer search management; search and rescue operations; logistics; public information and media relations; crime scene management; legal representation; analytics; and cybercrimes/technical support. A family liaison and victim advocate also will be available.



Leading by example

Learn about retired Captain Stacie Lick's commitment to her CART work **here**.



Model manuals

Many of the best practices used by the New Jersey and Pasco County, Florida, CARTs can be **found** in two newly updated, downloadable CART resources—one on implementation and the other on certification, both produced by the AATTAP team.

MAXIMIZE MESSAGING

Law enforcement technology consultant Eddie Bertola provided several updates related to the Integrated Public Alert & Warning System (IPAWS) overseen by the Federal Emergency Management System (FEMA).

The IPAWS portal that law enforcement uses to request AMBER Alerts now has a more streamlined interface. And within

that is the new **Message Design Dashboard** (MDD), “an intuitive structure taking message crafting from 15 minutes to five minutes,” Bertola said.

MDD features drop-down menus that provide access to essential information that can be provided in a consistent manner and allow best usage of the 360-character limit within varied templates. It also can check for typos and invalid links and allow for easier message previews and system testing.

Another new messaging development is the Missing and Endangered Person/

MEP Code, which was discussed in both the IPAWS workshop and updates session hosted by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC).

Approved in August 2024, the addition of the MEP code to the Emergency Alert System (EAS) will enable law enforcement agencies to more rapidly and effectively issue alerts about missing and endangered persons by covering a wider range of ages and circumstances than AMBER Alerts alone. MEP alerts will utilize the same infrastructure as AMBER Alerts, thus allowing for widespread dissemination through various channels.



IPAWS' new Message Design Dashboard provides templates to help law enforcement save time and ensure alerting consistency. It also offers message previews and testing.

INTELLIGENCE GATHERING



Pasco County, Florida, Sheriff's Office Captain Larry Kraus did an excellent job in explaining the application, effectiveness, and obstacles of OSINT. He is super-smart and relatable to those of us who may be tech-challenged.

John Graham, Investigator, Taylor County (Texas) Sheriff's Office

Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) analysis is the leveraging of data from publicly available communication sources, such as social media apps, messaging boards, gaming platforms, and the dark web. This research complements more traditional law enforcement databases (criminal databases, LInX, LeadsOnline) and can yield more real-time clues.

Bad actors are increasingly digital obsessed—and inadvertently work against themselves by taking photos and videos with geolocations and time stamps—while leaving other digital breadcrumbs.

OSINT analysts requires continuous training on ever-evolving information-sharing channels. They need to understand how to avoid gleaning intelligence that can be challenged in court (and potentially weaken public trust). All the while they have to battle data overload from the sheer volume of information that needs assessing.



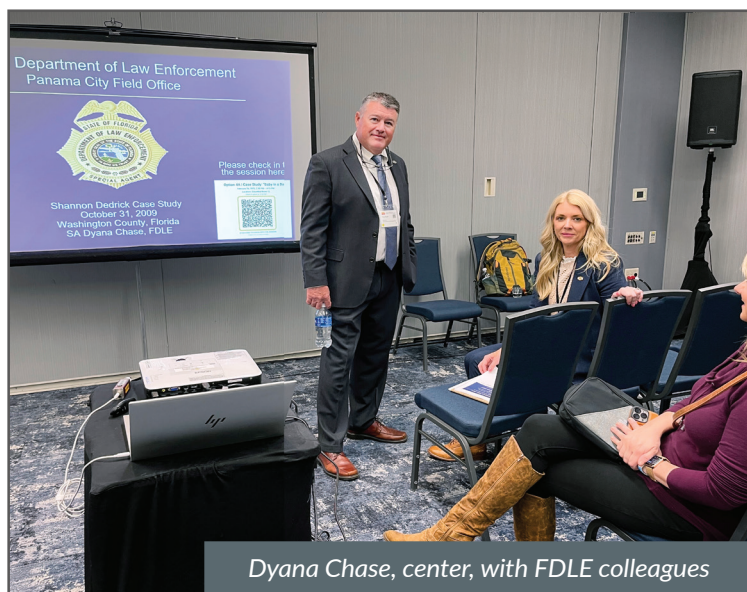
Captain Larry Kraus of the Pasco County (Florida) Sheriff's Office, Research & Analysis Division

It's imperative that agencies hire professionals capable of navigating such complexities, Kraus said of intelligence analysts, whom he calls “the unsung heroes of law enforcement.”

CASES IN POINT



Erika Hock



Dyana Chase, center, with FDLE colleagues



Erika Hock did a great job of presenting the Charlotte Sena case. Her humility shown through, especially when sharing the searching mother's criticisms [of their alerting process] ... and how she's looking to implement some of the mother's suggestions.

Ana Flores, Senior Case Manager, National Center for Missing & Exploited Children

Finding Shannon [Dedrick] renewed our sense of hope that a child could be found alive—even after five days of searching.

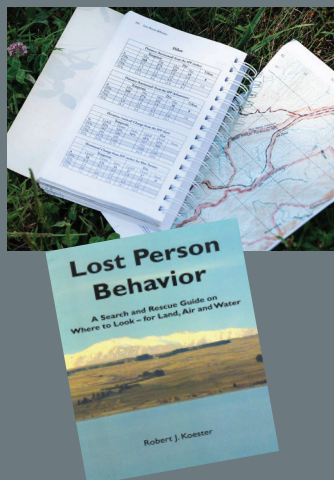
Dyana Chase, Special Agent/CART Supervisor, Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE)

I'd never heard of the 'Baby in a Box' case [involving Shannon Dedrick], and the ending surprised me. I loved hearing the investigative lessons learned from it.

Michael Garcia, Detective, Honolulu Police Department, Hawaii

FINDING 'LOST PERSON BEHAVIOR'

"I can't believe I didn't know about the **Lost Person Behavior** resource," one attendee said on Whova. Mentioned during Pasco County's CART workshop, "LPB," as its known for short, refers to the science- and data-based research of Dr. Robert J. Koester, whose field guide-style book outlines 41 missing persons categories and provides layers of behavior that a person in each classification will likely follow.



Welcoming U.S. Territories

Partners from American Samoa, Guam, and Puerto Rico traveled numerous time zones to attend the symposium. "They really appreciated getting to meet their counterparts in the States," said Yesenia "Jesi" Leon-Baron, AATTAP Project Coordinator for International/Territorial Programs.



Ed O'Carroll

GIVE PEOPLE BACK THEIR NAMES

In his “Genetic Genealogy” presentation, crime scene forensics expert Ed O’Carroll cited several ways to “give people their names back,” adding “crime is more solvable than ever before.”



- **Look afield:** Re-open a case involving a long-term missing person, or one with unidentified human remains, and let the growing realm of reputable DNA labs help solve a crime once thought unsolvable. “Our labs are overworked, so we need to find more ways to use private ones,” O’Carroll said.
- **Be a “genetic witness”:** Encourage people on the genealogy sites GEDmatch and AncestryDNA to opt in to giving law enforcement a broader field of DNA samples to consider when trying to pinpoint someone who may have committed a violent crime. “As many of us know, CODIS [the Combined DNA Index System] only gives a hit about half the time we use it.”
- **“Prevent tomorrow’s victim by solving today’s case today,”** O’Carroll said. Know the latest technology, including **Rapid DNA**, an FBI-approved process that can provide a scientific correlation in as little as 90 minutes.

DECODING ALERTING DECISIONS

This was the second year for AATTAP Region 1 Liaison and alerting veteran Joan Collins to teach the popular class “AMBER Alerts: To Activate or Not Activate.” It’s designed to help attendees analyze real-world cases of missing children and AMBER Alert requests, noting the key factors within the criteria that determine when an alert is issued; evaluate AMBER Alert effectiveness by comparing case details with activation criteria and assessing factors that influence decision-making; and propose improved response strategies.

Collins’ style is to amiably pepper participants with more than a dozen widely varying missing child scenarios, often throwing daunting updates into the mix. Participants responded using the Poll Everywhere app, which tabulated their responses in real-time on a large viewing screen.

“The alerting sessions instill confidence in new AMBER Alert Coordinators as well as seasoned ones,” Collins said. “The scenarios spark vigorous discussions, and networking with fellow AACs underscores the fact that they all go through the same process, even if criteria may differ.”



New course of action

AATTAP’s new course, 911 Telecommunicators and Missing & Abducted Children (aka “911 T-MAC”) is a must for public safety telecommunicators and members of law enforcement who face public calls for help. Look for online and in-person training opportunities [here](#).



“**‘AMBER Alerts: To Activate or Not Activate’ was my absolute favorite session at the symposium. Since I’m new to my position, it really made me think!**

Whytley Jones, AMBER Alert Coordinator, Louisiana State Police



PHOTOS: (SIGN, BOY) MINNESOTA BCA; (VEHICLE) STAFF PHOTO ILLUSTRATION

Triumph Amid Tragedy

Minnesota's first Tribal AMBER Alert underscores the vital role law enforcement partnerships and the public play in helping recover missing children—in this case, a toddler who tragically lost his two brothers.

Red Lake, Minnesota, set on the idyllic shores of one of the state's largest lakes, is typically a tranquil community. But on March 15, 2024, it bore witness to an unfathomable chain of events. The sirens of fire trucks and police cars echoed throughout the Red Lake Nation's towering pine and birch trees as first responders raced toward a one-story home from which smoke was billowing.

Tragically, emergency responders found two young boys with knife wounds inside the house; both boys died. The area was a **crime scene**, and agents from the FBI and Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension (BCA) were among those who joined the investigation.

Red Lake Police authorities would also soon learn that a third child lived at the house. Three-year-old Ethan Stately, authorities



Left: Red Lake Public Safety Director Kendall Kingbird Sr. (on right) and Lieutenant Geoff Pierre led Red Lake's AMBER Alert case that safely recovered 3-year-old Ethan Stately. **Above:** The Tribal community sits along one of northern Minnesota's vast lakes. **Opposite:** "With this AMBER Alert, we hit all the components," says Minnesota AMBER Alert Coordinator Janell Twardowski (far right), who worked on the case with BCA Assistant Special Agent in Charge Ricky Wuori (far left) and others.

realized, was missing and feared to be in danger, taken by his mother (who also was the mother of the two other boys).

Although the Red Lake Department of Public Safety had never before initiated an AMBER Alert, Department Director Kendall Kingbird Sr. and Lieutenant Geoff Pierre sensed how dire the situation was. "We had to get it solved and find our missing boy and mother," Kingbird says. "And we needed to do that as soon as possible." The AMBER Alert that followed would be the first one issued for any Minnesota Tribe.

The case's participating law enforcement agencies consider the collaboration a textbook example of an AMBER Alert response. From the beginning, state, Tribal, and federal partners coordinated efforts and shared information. The FBI immediately partnered with the Red Lake public safety department and BCA—responsible for issuing AMBER Alerts in Minnesota—and avoided communication silos to ensure resources were aligned and deployed. And the on-site presence of BCA Assistant Special Agent in Charge Ricky Wuori, alongside FBI agents and

Red Lake officers, facilitated rapid decision-making and an efficient, unified response.

The AMBER Alert itself solidly met all of the criteria. There was an abundance of information: the mother's and child's photos, a picture of the vehicle, the complete license plate number, and a distinctive Red Lake Nation tag. The alert also provided enough descriptive information to prompt a motorist who had seen the AMBER Alert to call authorities. "He spotted the vehicle, confirmed the license plate, and called 911," says Janell Twardowski, AMBER Alert Coordinator (AAC) with the BCA's Operations Center. "With any AMBER Alert, we're relying on the public to respond, and that's exactly what happened in this case."

Less than two hours after the statewide AMBER Alert was issued around 9 p.m., authorities acting on the motorist's tip pulled over the mother's vehicle on a Minnesota highway. The toddler was safe inside, but showed signs of neglect. The mother, Jennifer Stately, was arrested and has since been federally **charged** with various counts of murder, arson, and child neglect. (An





BCA **AMBER ALERT** **AMBER ALERT**

This AMBER Alert is intended to advise you of a child abduction in Minnesota. If you have information regarding the victim or suspects whereabouts or think you have seen them, call the issuing law enforcement agency shown below or call 911. Your identity will remain confidential.

TYPE OF ALERT: Original	TYPE OF INCIDENT: Child abduction
ISSUING AGENCY: RED LAKE TRIBAL POLICE	AGENCY PHONE NUMBER: 318-679-3313
INCIDENT LOCATION: Red Lake Tribal Area	DATE & TIME OCCURRED: 3/15/2024 6:30 PM

The Red Lake Tribal Police Department is searching for abducted 3-year-old male Ethan Stately. Ethan is Native American, with brown eyes and brown hair. Police are also looking for Jennifer Marie Stately, a 36-year-old Native American female, in connection with this abduction. Jennifer is approximately 5 feet, 6 inches tall, weighs 125 pounds, and has brown eyes and brown hair. Jennifer Stately was last seen driving a 2012 Black Chevrolet Equinox with a Red Lake Tribal license number 33509.

If you have any information regarding Ethan Stately or Jennifer Stately, call the Red Lake Tribal Police Department at 238-679-3313 or 911. Anyone who sees the suspect should take no action other than contact the police as soon as possible.

Not Actual Vehicle

VICTIM DESCRIPTION:	
NAME OF UNKNOWN: ETHAN PHIL STATELY	LAST KNOWN LOCATION OF VICTIM: RED LAKE TRIBAL AREA
SEX: MALE	RACE: NATIVE
AGE: 3	DOB: 02/08/2021
HEIGHT:	WEIGHT:
HAIR: BROWN	EYES: BROWN



indictment alleges that Stately fatally stabbed one of her boys and slashed the other before setting the house on fire and fleeing with Ethan. She has filed an insanity defense.)

Trusted Relationships

The **Red Lake Nation**, one of the state's 11 federally recognized Tribes, has full sovereignty, subject only to the federal government. (It's one of two Minnesota Tribes exempt from **Public Law 280**; therefore state courts/government have no jurisdiction.)

The fact that Kingbird and Pierre made the swift decision to initiate the department's first-ever AMBER Alert stems in part from a trusted relationship with Wuori, who works out of the BCA's regional office in Bemidji. "They have assisted us with a lot," Kingbird says.

Wuori credits ongoing communication as key to building trust between agencies. "When you have a good relationship, it's easier to get things moving," he says. "It's constant communication—stopping in and checking on everybody from time to time, not just when you need something." Tribal investigators regularly meet with BCA agents, and BCA has held training specific to AMBER Alerts. Additionally, over the years, Minnesota's Tribal communities have received ongoing

training and support from the AMBER Alert Training & Technical Assistance Program (AATTAP) and its AMBER Alert in Indian Country initiative, which are funded by the U.S. Department of Justice and supported by the **Ashlynnne Mike AMBER Alert in Indian Country Act**.

As Minnesota's AAC, Twardowski points to similar relationship-building needed to ensure an AMBER Alert reaches as many people as possible. She credits the state's media with timely stories and the state's transportation department with posting roadside alert messages. "As an agency, we are committed to leveraging our partnerships to reach as many Minnesotans as possible," she says.

Bittersweet Ending

In the aftermath of the incident, an outpouring of emotion filled the Red Lake community. A walk of remembrance and candlelight vigil were held to honor the 5- and 6-year-old brothers who died. Yet despite the profound grief, displays of hope and strength emerged. "We're a tight-knit community," Kingbird says.

For him, the tragedy instilled confidence in the AMBER Alert process. "We couldn't have asked for a quicker response and a better outcome," he says. "We're glad the child was located, and it wouldn't have been possible without an AMBER Alert."

"In the face of such tragedy, the partnership between local, state, Tribal, and federal agencies proved crucial. Through our combined efforts and the vigilance of the public, we were able to locate a missing child and hold those responsible accountable.

Alvin M. Winston Sr.
Special Agent in Charge,
FBI Minneapolis

"This case is yet another example of how AMBER Alerts save lives. They get critical information out quickly to millions ... [who are] willing to step up to help rescue a child in mortal danger.

Drew Evans
BCA Superintendent
—in a statement from
the U.S. Attorney's
Office, District of
Minnesota

Take 5 with TBI's AAC

Five years ago this spring we introduced you to Tennessee law enforcement veteran Shelly Smitherman. We're checking back in to see how much has changed since then.

Working on behalf of children has been the crux of Shelly Smitherman's 28-year career with the state of Tennessee. Early on, she investigated abuse cases for the Department of Children's Services in Nashville. Later, as a drug agent with the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation (TBI), she was assigned to help search in the case of Holly Bobo, a nursing student whose abduction and murder led to the state expanding TBI's Endangered Child Alerts to include persons over the age of 18.

But it was when she began working as an agent in the TBI's Criminal Intelligence Unit that she saw firsthand the impact of AMBER Alerts. In her first case involving a missing child, a TBI AMBER Alert for a 15-year-old girl kidnapped by her 50-year-old teacher sparked a **nationwide search**. Public tips ultimately led to the teen's safe recovery in California. "I feel like we had the whole nation looking for this child," Smitherman says of the 2017 case.

Later that year, Smitherman became Tennessee's AMBER Alert Coordinator (AAC) and Assistant Special Agent in Charge overseeing TBI's Missing Persons Unit, a position she has held for eight years. "I've



“Time matters on every AMBER Alert, so the pressure is always there. As soon as I get a call, I’m in that mode to locate the child and pull in every resource to find them.”

Shelly Smitherman

AMBER Alert Coordinator and
Assistant Special Agent in Charge,
Tennessee Bureau of Investigation

always been passionate about working investigations when children are in danger,” she says of her varied roles.

Nearly three decades into her career, that passion hasn't changed. But the processes have, as technology dramatically shifted alerting and investigations. "I remember a time when intelligence meant writing

information on a spreadsheet on a piece of paper,” Smitherman says.

It’s been five years since *The AMBER Advocate* talked with Smitherman, so we caught up with the law enforcement veteran to discuss changes and challenges. As it happens, she had spent the previous day issuing an AMBER Alert in a case involving a noncustodial parent who had threatened to harm his 2-year-old; the girl was safely recovered. “It’s a reminder of the importance of agencies working together for one goal,” she says.

How has the process of issuing an AMBER Alert changed in the past five years?

In the past five years, we have definitely improved the process to request an AMBER Alert from local agencies. We now have a digital request form—the “push-packet”—that can be completed on scene from a cell phone or computer. The form contains all of the essential information that we will need to rapidly issue the alert. We provide training to local agencies across the state on a regular basis to ensure agencies are equipped before a child goes missing in Tennessee.

What are some specific advancements that are helping after an alert is issued?

One of our biggest advancements is license plate readers (LPRs). Those have been a game-changer for us if there’s a vehicle involved in locating a missing child. They also give us access to find a vehicle in a different state. Microsoft Teams has been another game-changer. We can put criminal intelligence, a suspect’s driver’s license, criminal history, and the AMBER Alert poster in a Teams chat and everybody gets that information in real time—even to someone on the ground in the middle of “Nowhere, Tennessee.”

Luring is a growing issue due to more children using social media. How are you addressing this in your state?

The majority of our Endangered Child Alerts—we have about 40 a year—are kids meeting with someone they met online. Luring is going to be a continued problem as long as kids have cell phones or access to social media. There’s no way to control it. Kids don’t understand the risks of talking to a complete stranger until maybe they’ve met up and they’re put in danger. We’re always steps behind in an



On average, Tennessee has more than 700 missing children reports each year. In 2024, there were seven AMBER Alerts and 50 Endangered Child Alerts.



investigation that involves social media because the apps and platforms they use change every day. We have to figure out ways to find them quicker; that’s the hard part.

On the flip side, how does TBI use social media to its advantage?

One thing we do is issue alerts through Bitly. On average, about 800,000 people view them on social media. Having 800,000 people helping us look for that missing child—we definitely want that help. With that many people looking, we’re going to find the child faster.



Shelly Smitherman, second from left, is shown at an AATTAP Region 2 meeting with TBI Special Agent Emily Keifer, AATTAP Associate Kimber Biggs, and NCJTC Director/AATTAP Administrator Janell Rasmussen.



Smitherman's storied career with the TBI has included the joy of being on scene when a baby was safely recovered in the middle of the night (top right) and networking with agencies working on behalf of missing children. She's pictured (above right) visiting the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children with Keifer and Criminal Intelligence Analyst Marisha Byrd, all part of the TBI's Criminal Intelligence Missing Persons Unit.

What about any accomplishments—what makes you proud?

I'm really proud of TBI's role in missing children investigations. We don't stop after we issue an AMBER Alert. We'll have at minimum 10 to 20 agents assisting on the case. Everybody stops what they're doing and helps. Our crisis team is obviously involved. We'll also have the criminal investigations, criminal intelligence, and cybercrime units assisting. And our Child Abduction Response team (CART) responds statewide to all AMBER Alerts. [TBI's CART program is certified by the U.S. DOJ.]

What advice do you have for fellow AACs?

It's really important for AMBER Alert Coordinators, especially new ones, to get to know the coordinators in surrounding states. I have a good relationship with the other state coordinators in our Southeast Region. We share and discuss information and ideas with each other. Tennessee is connected to so many states, so having contacts where I can reach out at any time has been a great tool.

How important has your networking been?

So often, I need assistance from another state during an alert, and being able to call someone I met at AATTAP [AMBER Alert Training & Technical Assistance Program] meetings or the national symposium for help is truly an advantage. It saves so much time getting to the right person in another state, especially when time is of the essence.

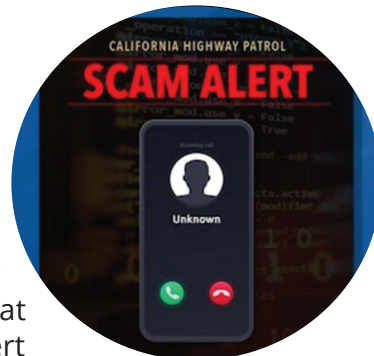
What would you like local law enforcement agencies to know?

Reach out. If an agency isn't sure if something meets the AMBER Alert requirements, call and we'll talk it through. Sometimes local agencies may take steps—such as interviews and surveillance—that could be done after we issue the AMBER Alert. That's time where something could have gone in a bad direction for the child, and it puts us behind in getting the public's help to search. Every second counts, so reach out.

NEWS BRIEFS

AMBER Alert scam claims to 'register' children

A phone **scam** in which callers pose as "AMBER Alert representatives" and offer to "register" children has prompted a firm warning to the public from the California Highway Patrol (CHP). "This is NOT how AMBER Alerts work!" CHP posted in a social media alert. Fraudsters contact parents with an offer to "register" their children in a database for use if the child goes missing or is taken. They ask for confidential information and an in-home meeting. CHP warned that it is the only California agency authorized to activate an AMBER Alert and that registration for an alert is never required. The public is urged to **alert** local law enforcement if a scammer contacts them and to never provide personal information or answer calls from unknown numbers.



Ohio group to study investigation process

Ohio law enforcement authorities, child advocates, and family members who have or had missing loved ones are teaming up on a newly created Missing Persons Working Group. Ohio Governor Mike DeWine tasked the **group** with reviewing the state's resources and response to cases of missing children and adults. "The ultimate goal here is to bring more missing people home safely," DeWine said. Led by the Ohio Department of Public Safety, the group will analyze how disappearances are investigated and suggest improvements, as well as study database usage and law enforcement training, and hear from family members with missing loved ones. Group appointee Jonisa Cook, whose 6-year-old son with **autism** went missing before being found deceased in a pond, said her mission is to turn a tragedy into something positive. "That's what's getting me going every day, knowing that I could potentially help someone else, potentially help another family," she said.



TikTok now sharing AMBER Alerts nationwide

TikTok is teaming up with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) to bring critical, time-sensitive information directly to people's "For You" **feeds**. The goal is to raise awareness of missing children and leverage the power of the U.S. TikTok community to help reunite missing children with their families. The project was piloted in Texas from January to December 2024, when AMBER Alerts were viewed more than 20 million times and contributed to 2.5 million visits to NCMEC's website. The AMBER Alerts will now reach more than 170 million Americans.



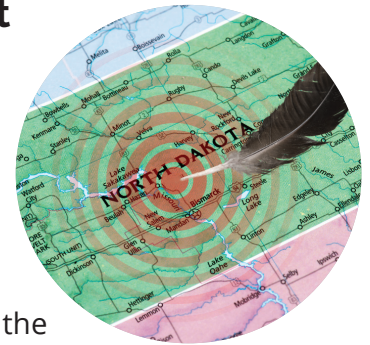
New law to allow funding for Montana Missing Indigenous Persons Task Force

In 2019, the Montana Legislature created the Montana Missing Indigenous Persons Task Force. The effort brought together Tribal representatives with local, state, and federal law enforcement officials to address the disproportionately high number of missing or murdered Indigenous children and adults. But ever since its creation, the **task force** has not had a way to raise money for training, equipment, and other expenses to fulfill its goals. A new **law** will change that. During the 2025 legislative session, State Representative Tyson Running Wolf sponsored a measure that creates a special state revenue account to allow the task force to raise and accept its own funding through grants, gifts, and donations. The measure authorizes the account to initially be funded with \$1. The bill sailed through both the House and Senate before being signed by Montana Governor Gianforte. The law takes effect July 1.



North Dakota lawmakers push for Feather Alert for Indigenous missing persons

Noting that eight Indigenous youth under the age of 18 had gone missing in the first five weeks of 2025, North Dakota Representative Jayme Davis introduced a **bill** urging state lawmakers to pass a Feather Alert to help safely recover missing persons from Tribal communities. The alert would be “another tool in our toolbox” to combat the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous people, said Davis, an enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa. “This is not just a Tribal issue—it is a North Dakota issue, and it is our responsibility to act,” Davis noted in pushing the measure forward. The Feather Alert would only be activated at the state level after meeting strict criteria, comparable to an AMBER Alert, in which the missing person is believed to be in danger and there is information about the vehicle, person, or abductor. **California** is currently the only state with a Feather Alert. In addition to the new alert, North Dakota lawmakers have also been considering a measure to create a **task force** designed to fill communication gaps among Tribal, federal, state, and local agencies.



California mandate seeks collection and sharing of data about crimes on Tribal lands

A new measure will require law enforcement authorities in California to collect and provide information on **crimes** that occur on Native American lands. Under the mandate signed by Governor Gavin Newsom, the data must be provided to the California Department of Justice to help better address the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons (MMIP) crisis and collaboratively work toward improving public safety and justice in Indian Country.



Missing U.S. siblings safely recovered in Iceland

"The collaboration of effort in this case can't be overstated." So said U.S. Marshal Pete Elliott of an **international search** that led to the safe recovery of two missing children located in Iceland, some 3,000 miles away from their Ohio home. A family member who reported the 8- and 9-year-old missing in October 2024 indicated their mother had mental health issues and had stopped taking her medication. The ensuing three-month search included the U.S. Marshals Service, State Department, Interpol, and local police departments. The mother took the children to New York and Vermont before being tracked to Denver, Colorado, London, England, the Island of Jersey in the English Channel, a remote fishing village in Iceland, and finally to the capital city of Reykjavik, where local authorities located them in a hotel. Elliott said recovering children abroad is "extremely difficult," and credited dedicated law enforcement officers for their work. After the children were placed in the care of social services, the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children provided financial support to **reunite** them with family in the U.S. The mother was recovering in a hospital.



New system thwarts international abductions

A newly implemented system that links databases is being credited with helping combat international child abductions. In one case, two missing children were safely recovered at the Islamabad, Pakistan, airport in an apparent abduction by a noncustodial parent. Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency's (FIA) emigration database that was linked with Interpol's global Integrated Border Management System (IBMS) pinpointed the children when they arrived at the airport with their father after traveling from the central Asian country of Kyrgyzstan. The children were reported missing in 2022, after which time Pakistan authorities had issued global police alerts known as yellow notices. The FIA said the ability to leverage the Interpol system, as well as **enhanced cooperation** among international agencies, marks a significant advancement in addressing international child abductions and other security issues.



South Africa: Missing children's cases rise

More than 2,000 children were **reported** missing in South Africa in the past three years in what some authorities say appears to be signaling a disturbing trend. Missing Children South Africa, a nongovernmental organization that **assists** police in missing persons cases, says the number of missing children is likely even higher, with many incidents, particularly in rural areas, unreported. The majority of the 2,000 children were found, but more than 700 remain missing without a trace, **according** to law enforcement authorities. Bianca van Aswegen, national coordinator for Missing Children South Africa, said abductions and human trafficking are indicative of the country's rising crime rate. However, she said cases also involve children who have left home voluntarily or are from homes where the parents aren't financially able to provide for the child. Additionally, a human rights organization raised concerns about increased kidnappings for **ransom** done by organized crime rings.



COURSES OF ACTION



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