

Transcript - Public Information Officers and Tribal Law Enforcement Agencies Partnering During Missing Child Investigations

Welcome to the National Criminal Justice Training Center webinar, Public Information Officers & Tribal Law Enforcement Agencies Partnering During Missing Child Investigations. My name is Tanea Parmenter, and I'll be your moderator for today.

This course was developed by the US Department of Justice, Office of Justice programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and its AMBER Alert Training and Technical Assistance program.

In conjunction with our mission, our webinar series works to bring together state, local, and tribal subject matter experts to present and discuss critical issues relating to missing and abducted children. I'm pleased to introduce our presenter today, Alica Wildcatt. Alica is a project coordinator for AMBER Alert in Indian Country, where she works to strengthen response to child abductions and missing children in tribal communities through coordinated training, outreach, and inter-agency collaboration.

A citizen of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, Alica brings more than 25 years of service to her community, including 17 years with the Cherokee Indian Police Department, where she served as a civilian staff member and the Department of Public Information officer. Her experience as a public information officer now supports her work in Indian Country, where she helps tribal nations strengthen their emergency communication strategies and integrate with the National AMBER Alert system.

Thanks for joining us today. Alica, the time is now yours.

Thank you, Tanea, for the introduction. I also want to extend my sincere appreciation to each of you for taking the time to join us today. Your commitment to learning and collaboration is vital to strengthening our collective ability to respond effectively in times of crisis.

During our session today, we'll focus on three key learning objectives. First, understanding the role of the PIO and the critical part we play in crisis communication. Second, we'll explore the responsibilities and unique challenges that tribal agencies face in missing child cases. And finally, we'll discuss the importance of collaboration between PIOs and tribal law enforcement to improve investigative outcomes and foster meaningful public engagement.

Together, these objectives will equip us with the tools and strategies to better protect our communities and the children we serve. Also giving us understanding that will prepare us to build stronger communication frameworks within our agencies and across jurisdictions, ultimately, improving outcomes and missing child investigations.

Let's begin by defining what a PIO is and what their role is. A PIO is a designated individual within an organization whose primary responsibility is to serve as the voice and face of the agency to the public, the media, and key stakeholders. This position is not just about drafting press releases or fielding media calls. It's about building trust, managing information flow, and ensuring your agency speaks one clear, unified voice.

As a PIO, you are the bridge between your agency and the outside world, translating complex or evolving situations into information to the public that they can understand and act upon. This responsibility becomes critically important during high-pressure situations like emergencies, major incidents, or in a community crisis. In these moments, accuracy, speed, and consistency are not just nice to have, they can directly influence the safety of individuals, the effectiveness of emergency response, and the public's confidence in your agency.

An effective PIO does more than relay facts. We often anticipate questions, address misinformation before it spreads, and ensure that every message aligns with your agency's policy and priorities. These things can be vital during situations where seconds count, like a missing child or an AMBER Alert situation, when it's our responsibility as PIOs to coordinate with investigators, leadership, and sometimes multiple jurisdictions to get actionable information to the right audience without delay.

The same principles apply to natural disasters, public health emergencies, and large-scale community events, where effective messaging can help guide public behavior, manage expectations, and prevent panic. Ultimately, your role as a PIO is about connecting people to critical information in a way that is clear, credible, and compassionate. Whether working behind the scenes to prepare communication strategies or standing in front of a camera during a crisis, the PIO is a vital part of an agency's operational readiness and community trust.

As the PIO, you are the vital link between your agency and the media, responsible for ensuring that the right information reaches the right audience at the right time. This relationship is not built overnight. It requires ongoing effort to establish trust and credibility with local and regional journalists well before a crisis occurs.

I can't stress this enough. Proactive engagement is key, as it allows you to set the foundation for accurate and timely reporting when emergencies happen, like when a child goes missing. In Indian Country, your role carries an added layer of responsibility. Educating the media about unique jurisdictional complexities, cultural sensitivities, and community dynamics can significantly influence how information is communicated and received.

Crafting press releases and public statements is one of the most visible aspects of our work, but it requires far more than simply relaying facts. In a missing child investigation, for example, every word matters. Your statements must be clear, factual, and timely, reflecting your agency's official voice, while showing respect for the child, the family, and the community.

Speculation must be avoided at all cost, as an accurate or premature information can damage trust and hinder investigation efforts. Having pre-drafted templates, checklists, and approval processes in place ensure that you can respond quicker under pressure without sacrificing accuracy or consistency.

Crisis communication is where your skills will be tested. In these moments, you must carefully manage the flow of information, both within your agency and externally, to the public and the media. Your goal is to reduce panic, clarify facts, and support investigative efforts by ensuring that the public receives reliable information.

This requires consistent coordination with command staff, investigators, and sometimes legal advisors, to balance transparency, with the need to protect sensitive details that could impact the case. Your ability to remain composed, factual, and consistent during these high-stress situations will directly influence public perception and community cooperation.

Equally important is the work you do outside of emergencies. The public outreach. Trust is not earned during a crisis. It's earned long before. By engaging your community through events, social media, and regular updates, you can build the credibility and the cooperation needed when urgent situations arise.

For tribal communities, outreach takes on an additional cultural and relational elements. It often means working closely with tribal leaders, honoring cultural protocols, and ensuring that messaging reflects the values, traditions, and the priorities of your community. These relationships are not just beneficial, they're essential, providing a foundation of trust that can determine how effectively your agency and the public work together when lives are at stake.

In Indian Country, the role of the PIO comes with unique challenges that can complicate and delay critical response efforts. One of the most significant hurdles is jurisdictional complexity. Overlapping authority between tribal, state, federal, and local agencies can create confusion over which entity is responsible for leading an investigation or activating an AMBER Alert. This uncertainty can cost valuable time in situations where every second matters.

Limited resources add another layer of difficulty. Many tribal agencies operate with minimal staffing, training, and in some cases, technology. Geographical isolation and limited infrastructure can further hinder search efforts and make timely communication more difficult. These limitations mean that PIOs and tribal communities often have to be resourceful, finding ways to maximize impact with the tools they have available.

Another challenge is the lack of established protocols. Without written policies for handling missing child investigations, responses can be inconsistent and less effective. In addition, not all tribal agencies have reliable access to national databases like NCIC or State clearinghouse systems, which can slow the flow of crucial information.

Gaps in communication and notification can also impede progress. Delays in sharing information with partners or the public, combined with the absence of a designated PIO or a crisis communication plan, can lead to confusion and missed opportunities to engage the community in search efforts. Finally, cultural considerations must always be taken into account. Outsiders may not fully understand tribal customs, governance, or the community communication preference.

Mistrust of external agencies can impact cooperation and the public's willingness to engage. For PIOs working in Indian Country, building trust, respecting cultural protocols, and ensuring messages are both accurate and culturally sensitive are not just best practices, they are essential in saving lives.

Your role as the PIO in missing or abducted child investigations is vital. This role is far more than simply speaking to the press. It's about ensuring the accurate, timely, and consistent information reaches the public, the media, and families who are directly affected. One of the PIO's most critical responsibilities is coordinating public alerts.

When a child goes missing, time is our greatest enemy. The PIO works hand in hand with law enforcement to verify facts before issuing an AMBER Alert or any other notification. Accuracy and speed are essential, because getting the right information to the public quickly can make all the difference in mobilizing the community's support.

Another key responsibility is media relations. The PIO serves as the primary bridge between the agency and the media. They prepare press releases, hold briefings, and respond to media inquiries, always working to maintain transparency without compromising the investigation. In these moments, the PIO's words can shape public perception and ensure the investigation stays on track.

The PIO also manages information flow, deciding what information to release, when to release it, and how it is shared. This role requires balance with the public's right to know, with the need to protecting the integrity of the case. They also ensure that all agencies involved are consistent in their messaging, which is essential for credibility and clarity.

Engaging the community is another powerful tool in a PIO's toolkit. Public involvement can generate valuable tips and speed up resolutions. PIOs use social media, community meetings, and press conferences to foster trust and encourage vigilance in tribal and underserved communities, culturally appropriate outreach is especially important for building cooperation and ensuring that communication efforts truly resonate.

In today's world, combating s is a constant battle. False information can spread online within minutes, jeopardizing the investigation and undermining trust. As PIOs, we must actively monitor social media, correct false narratives, and clarify facts quickly. This vigilance helps maintain public confidence and prevents the spread of damaging rumors.

Finally, one of the most sensitive, yet crucial aspects of the PIO role is supporting family communication. In these heartbreaking situations, the PIO often acts as a coordinator between law enforcement and the family, helping prepare statements, facilitating safe media interactions, and ensuring that every communication is trauma informed and respectful.

In short, the PIO is not just a spokesperson, we are the communicators, the strategist, the protector of facts, and a bridge between law enforcement, the public, and families in crisis. Our work is essential to the success of an investigation and ultimately, to bring a child home safely.

The role of the law enforcement agency is to provide timely and accurate information and keeping the PIO informed. Those duties include, designating a single voice. Typically, that is your PIO. They support the release of critical information and make sure that it is timely.

Participation in joint information sharing is a need that is done up front, especially when you have multi-layered investigations with local, federal, and state agencies, you want to establish those joint information systems so that you have one unified voice. Maintain situational awareness on all of your social media, media, sites where you're fielding questions, and dispelling rumors.

Respect the investigative timeline by providing those media updates time in a timely manner so that your resolution comes as quickly and safely as possible. Again, include the PIO in any planning so that there are no questions when your emergency arises. Fostering community engagement is always the goal when you have a missing child.

A missing child investigations within tribal communities, law enforcement agencies face a set of challenges that require deliberate planning, cultural understanding, and seamless coordination. One of the most significant obstacles is jurisdictional complexity. Confusion over which agency has authority can delay critical communication and action.

To address this, agencies must ensure all parties are educated on jurisdictional boundaries. The MOUs are in place so that roles during joint investigations are clearly defined. It's also important to ensure public messaging includes jurisdictional context to reduce misinformation.

Cultural sensitivity and sovereignty are equally vital to successful communication. A lack of cultural awareness can quickly erode community trust, making cooperation more difficult. This means PIOs should be trained in tribal, cultural, language, and customs, and when possible, partner with community leaders or elders to co-deliver messages. Using familiar, respectful language and framing communication around the shared goal of protecting the child and the community fosters trust and engagement.

Another hurdle is limited PIO staffing and resources. Many tribal agencies operate with only part-time PIO or designated spokesperson. Agencies can prepare for emergencies by cross-training staff to serve as backup PIOs, developing pre-approved media toolkits with templates for alerts and press releases, and by building partnerships with nearby agencies or a regional PIO network for mutual support when needed.

In today's fast-paced information environment, misinformation and social media rumors can derail investigations in minutes. Agencies must work with PIOs to actively monitor online platforms, correct false narratives in real time, and issue frequent official updates even when there's no new information, to make sure that the public is reassured and keep them focused on verified sources. Encouraging the community to rely on trusted tribal or law enforcement channels is key to maintaining credibility.

Delays in public notification can be just as damaging. Every moment lost in issuing an alert can impact the chances of recovery. To minimize delays, agencies should create pre-developed media templates for missing child scenarios, educate tribal leaders on the importance of rapid PIO activation, and use a variety of communication tools to quickly reach the widest audience possible.

Finally, lack of coordination and messaging can cause conflicting statements between tribal, state, and federal agencies, leading to public confusion and distrust. This is why it's critical to establish a joint information system early in an incident, designating a single lead PIO, or spokesperson to coordinate and approve all outgoing information and use incident command system protocols to keep communication organized and consistent.

When agencies proactively address these challenges through preparation, training, cultural engagement, and coordinated messaging, they not only strengthen their investigative efforts, but also, reinforce community trust. And in a missing child case, that trust is essential for mobilizing the community, gathering critical information, and ultimately, bringing the child home safely.

In a crisis or high-stakes situation, the way we communicate can directly impact the success of our response. Timely, accurate, and strategic communication ensures that vital information reaches the right people quickly. And in a missing child case, that speed can be life saving.

We have a range of communication tools available to us, each with its strengths, and it's important to use them strategically, often in combination, to reach the broadest audience possible. Television is one of the most powerful tools for quickly reaching large audiences, particularly during emergencies. Local news stations can amplify alerts and critical information almost instantly. Giving our message both reach and credibility.

Newspapers are sometimes considered outdated, but are still an important resource, especially in rural or elder populations, where local papers remain a trusted source of information. Press releases and feature stories can also help educate and inform the public beyond the immediate crisis.

Radio is another vital channel, especially in areas with limited internet or cell service. Many tribal communities rely heavily on local radio stations for news and urgent alerts, making it an essential component of our outreach strategy.

Social media platforms like Facebook; X, formerly Twitter; and Instagram allow us to connect directly with the public, delivering updates rapidly, interactively, and with visuals. They're powerful tools for engagement, but require monitoring and two-way communication to be effective.

Mass notification systems like CodeRED, Everbridge, or Nixle allow us to send alerts via text, phone, and email simultaneously. These systems are indispensable for AMBER Alerts, weather emergencies, and missing person cases, allowing us to mobilize the community instantly.

Crisis communication apps, including tools like FEMA app, PulsePoint, or Signal, can help streamline communication between agencies and with the public. Many of these apps offer mapping features, real-time status updates, and even public tip submission capabilities, making them valuable for both coordination and engagement.

Finally, survey and feedback tools such as Google Forms or SurveyMonkey allow us to evaluate our communication efforts after the fact. By gathering community feedback, we can identify what worked, what didn't, and how to improve for future incidents.

It's important to remember no single tool fits every situation. The most effective approach is a layered one, a multi-platform strategy. You have to use the right mix of channels to ensure that vital information is reaching as many people as possible as quickly, accurately, and clearly as you can. In the end, your goal is to create a communication network that informs, engages, and empowers the public to be part of the solution.

Developing a strong agency action plan is one of the most important steps you can take to ensure your team is prepared to communicate effectively before, during, and after a critical incident, especially in child abduction cases. The first step is to start or improve your PIO program. Every agency, regardless of size, should designate a PIO, even if it's a part-time role or an added duty to an existing position.

If you already have a program in place, take the time to assess whether it's truly up to date. Ask some simple questions. Do we have clearly defined roles, the right tools, and an established chain of command for public communications? For tribal communities, a competent, culturally informed PIO plan is essential, as each tribe has unique cultural and jurisdictional needs that must be respected in all public messaging.

A policy checklist is a valuable tool for ensuring consistency and accountability. Review your current communication policies and confirm that they address key areas, such as media access, social media protocols, crisis communication procedures, and guidelines for issuing AMBER Alerts or managing tribal, state, and federal coordination.

Having a documented checklist not only helps keep messaging consistent, but can also identify gaps, such as missing procedures for specific types of incidents so they can be addressed before the crisis occurs. Training and resource recommendations are equally important. Ongoing training keeps your team ready to respond at any time. That could include PIO courses, FEMA's ICS training, and tribal-specific communication workshops.

Agencies should also connect with partners like NCJTC, or the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and tribal emergency management organizations for access to additional toolkits, templates, and exercises. Cross training is another critical component. Ensuring more than one staff member is capable of handling public information duties means you'll always have coverage, even when the primary PIO is unavailable.

An action plan is not a single document. It's a living framework that must be revisited and refined regularly-- updated based on lessons learned from past incidents, emerging best practices, and feedback from your community. Make sure every member of your team understands their role in public communication. In a crisis, clear, accurate, and coordinated messaging isn't just your professional responsibility. It's a lifeline for the public you serve.

There are four key principles I would like you to take away from the presentation today. Trust. Consistency builds reliability. Trust isn't created overnight. It develops through repeated, dependable actions over time. Consistent communication helps others feel secure in your intentions and depend on your word.

Inconsistent or unpredictable messaging can erode trust quickly, even if it's unintentional. Honesty fosters credibility. Transparency, and truthfulness, even when the message is difficult, shows integrity. People are more likely to trust those who are upfront, admit mistakes, and set realistic expectations.

Avoid spin or vague language shows that you respect the intelligence and autonomy of your audience. Cultural respect deepens the connection. Communication that honors cultural differences demonstrates empathy and awareness. Take time to understand values, customs, and preferred communication styles. This will build rapport.

Culturally respectful communication avoids assumptions and promotes inclusivity, which strengthens trust across diverse groups. When we put all of that together, communication is consistent on its honest and culturally aware. It builds a solid foundation of trust. This approach is essential, not just in leadership or customer relations, but in any relationship, personal or professional.

Transparency builds credibility with the public and media. As the PIO, clear, timely, and accurate communication signals that the agency is doing everything possible to locate the child. Sharing confirmed facts, even if limited, shows the public and media that law enforcement is being honest and not withholding information unnecessarily.

Avoid speculation, but explain what can be shared and why some details must remain confidential. Transparency enhances accountability and trust.

Being open about the steps the agency is taking, search efforts, coordination with other agencies, community involvement reinforces accountability. If delays, challenges, or mistakes occur, acknowledge them, and explain how they are being addressed shows responsibility and leadership.

Transparent communication supports public cooperation. The public plays a crucial role in missing child cases, and transparency encourages community vigilance and participation. Use press briefings and social media updates to guide how the public can help. For example, reporting tips, checking surveillance, and sharing alerts.

Balance transparency with sensitivity. Transparency must be balanced with empathy for the family and care for the child's safety. Avoid sensationalism or releasing harmful details. Keep the focus on the child, not just the investigation in progress.

Investment. Proactive communication builds trust before a crisis occurs. A strong PIO doesn't just speak during emergencies, they share ongoing updates, highlight positive community work, and provide educational information. This proactive visibility builds credibility before a crisis, making the agency more trusted during one.

Community confidence is built on clarity and access. People lose confidence when they feel left in the dark. A well-trained PIO ensures that accurate, timely information flows consistently. This clear division of responsibility strengthens overall agency performance and keeps messaging coordinated and professional.

Communication. Preparation enables a fast, accurate response. In a crisis, you don't have time to figure things out on the fly. Preparation ensures that you're ready to act immediately. Having a clear crisis communication plan, pre-approved messaging, templates, and designated roles eliminates confusion.

Training and drills for PIOs and command staff are key to a coordinated response. In high-stress situations, clear, direct communication calms the public and reinforces confidence in law enforcement. Avoid jargon, speculation, or overly complex messaging. Stick to what's confirmed and what the public needs to know.

If the answer is, we don't know yet, say that, and explain what steps are being taken to find out. Consistent messaging preserves credibility. All agencies and spokespeople must speak with one voice. Conflicting messaging damages credibility and slows the response. The PIO's role is to centralize information flow and coordinate internal communication to the public and media.

Crisis communication is a leadership function. How an agency communicates in a crisis reflects its values, professionalism, and respect for the community. It's not just about managing information, it's about maintaining trust when it's most fragile.

We have an activity, and I'd like for you to take a few minutes to reflect on your own personal experience. Think back to a time when your agency had to respond to a critical incident or a missing person case. As you reflect, consider these guiding questions.

What was your biggest communication challenge during that incident? What aspects of your communication efforts worked well? And who in your agency was responsible for sharing information with the public? Write down a few notes for yourself. Remember, it's not about criticism. It's about learning from real-world experiences so that we can grow stronger in how we respond in future incidents.

This is a scenario to think about. In 2022, a 12-year-old child went missing from a rural, tribal community. Local law enforcement responded quickly and initiated the search. This is a positive action. However, they didn't issue a public statement for 8 hours, leaving an information vacuum.

What went wrong? During the silence of officials, family members began posting online out of fear, frustration, and/or desperation. Those posts included conflicting or unverified information, which began to spread quickly. As confusion grew, public mistrust escalated, and pressure mounted on the agency.

Some key lessons learned during that-- silence creates space for misinformation; your PIO serves as a voice of the agency and ensures accurate, timely, and culturally respectful communication; PIOs are not just messengers, we're essential to maintaining public trust, protecting the integrity of the investigation, and supporting the family and community.

Some questions I'd like for you to think about in this scenario, what could have been done differently in those first 8 hours? How can agencies build protocols to ensure that PIOs are activated immediately? And why is it important for a PIO to be trained in tribal communication sensitivity?

So here's an activity for you to do on your own. Your agency receives a credible report of a missing 10-year-old child, and you are the designated PIO. I want you to draft a three-sentence message you would post on your agent's social media or provide to the press. Include only the verified facts. Ask for public assistance, if appropriate, and reflect cultural, respect and urgency.

Some resources that are out there for assisting in strengthening your PIO function is AMBER Alert in Indian Country Training. It's the foundation training that's offered through NCJTC, specifically for tribal communities. It covers best practices for issuing an AMBER Alert, collaboration across jurisdictions, and how to activate alerts effectively. And you can visit the website on the slide to access that training information.

PIO training from FEMA and ICS. FEMA's IS29 Public Information Officer Awareness course is free and provides essential skills for new or aspiring PIOs. It covers the PIO's role in emergency operations and crisis communication, and it's a great starting point for building your PIO knowledge base.

There are some sample media policy templates out there. Many tribal agencies request those, and there are some templates that are available through NCJTC or NCAI, which is the National Congress of American Indians. They can help your agency set guidelines for press releases, interviews, and social media communication.

And again, NCJTC's communication toolkit and case studies. These resources provide real-world examples and strategies used in tribal child abduction cases and crisis events. They include samples of press statements, communication flowcharts, and lessons learned from past AMBER Alerts. And you can find those at askamber@fvtc.edu.

During a presentation a few months ago, I heard this analogy, and it truly resonated with me. So in closing, I would like to leave you with this thought. Like the splints of a basket or strands in a weaving, each role in a crisis response has its own strength and purpose. Alone, a single strand can't hold much, but when woven together with intention, trust, and collaboration, those strands form a strong, functional vessel capable of carrying the weight of any challenge.

In every crisis, our success depends not just on individual effort, but on how well we weave our knowledge, communication, and compassion together. Let's commit to being part of a tightly woven team, one that is resilient, responsive, and ready to hold and support our community when they need us most.

Thank you for your time and attention today, but most importantly, thank you for your commitment to protecting our communities and their most vulnerable members. Your dedication makes a difference and together, we are building a safer, stronger future for all.

Thank you Alica. I appreciate that. We'll now take the time to answer any questions you might have for Alica. If you have any additional questions after the webinar, you can refer to her contact information shown on the screen. So we did have one question up in the Q&A.

As you mentioned, some tribal law enforcements do not have access to NCIC. Do most have a process for getting missing persons entered outside of their agency?

Yes. I think a lot of tribal agencies that don't have direct access to NCIC can get that access through TAP, or the Tribal access Program, and they can also work with state coordinators to get that input in NCIC.

Great. Thank you. Another question came in. What one cultural competency would you want to know about tribal communities?

That's a great question. I think, culturally, that tribes are often, not just law enforcement agencies, but community members at large are often-- there's a mistrust with outside agencies, and I think that there's a way to approach that, from a historical and culturally significant place, if that makes any sense, that allows us to bridge the gap and start building that trust again.

Thank you for that. Is there anything in the works to make one system or list that allows the databases to speak to each other, as you mentioned? NCIC, NamUs, et cetera, are all interacting to help those searches.

I can answer a little bit on this. NCIC is ran by the FBI in a different-- have their own protocols and requirements for connection. And NamUs is grant funded, ran by University of North Texas. So having those two databases connect to each other, it will probably be a while for that.

Most state missing person clearinghouse managers try to consolidate those. And so you can actually reach out to your State clearinghouse manager and to make sure that they are connecting with both of those databases and any other databases specific to their State as well.

All right. Thank you again, Alica, for a fantastic presentation and for sharing your wealth of knowledge and insight with us. And I'm getting a lot of thank yous in the Q&A, Alica, from your attendees.

For additional information on general TTA services, links to featured offerings and request TTA, please visit our website. Finally, watch your inbox and our website for upcoming webinars, virtual TTA opportunities. This concludes our webinar today. Thank you, again, to Alica Wildcatt for a great presentation.

Thank you to our attendees. We hope to see you in future webinars, and have a great day.