



## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### **Where and why did AMBER Alert first start?**

The AMBER Alert System began in 1996 when Dallas-Fort Worth broadcasters teamed with local police to develop an early warning system to help find abducted children. AMBER stands for America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response and was created as a legacy to 9-year-old Amber Hagerman, who was kidnapped while riding her bicycle in Arlington, Texas, and then brutally murdered. Other states and communities soon set up their own AMBER plans as the idea was adopted across the nation.

### **How does it work?**

Once law enforcement has determined that a child has been abducted and the abduction meets AMBER Alert criteria, law enforcement notifies broadcasters and state transportation officials. AMBER Alerts interrupt regular programming and are broadcast on radio and television and on highway signs. AMBER Alerts can also be issued on lottery tickets, to wireless devices such as mobile phones, and over the Internet. Through the coordination of local, state and regional plans, the Department of Justice is working towards the creation of a seamless national network.

### **How effective has it been?**

AMBER Alert has been very effective. AMBER Alert programs have helped save the lives of 495 children nationwide. Over 90 percent of those recoveries have occurred since October 2002, after a National AMBER Alert Coordinator was appointed as a result of the first-ever White House Conference on Missing, Exploited and Runaway Children.

AMBER Alerts serve as deterrents to those who would prey upon our children. AMBER Alert cases have shown that some perpetrators release the abducted child after hearing the AMBER Alert on the radio or seeing it on television.

### **Who is the National Coordinator for AMBER Alert and what is the Coordinator's role?**

Laurie Robinson, Assistant Attorney General for the Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, is the current National AMBER Alert Coordinator. Her role as National Coordinator is to facilitate the development of the AMBER network, support the development of state AMBER plans and efforts, help eliminate geographic gaps in AMBER networks, provide regional AMBER network coordination and provide guidance on criteria for issuing an AMBER Alert.

### **How does the AMBER Alert plan help children and families?**

The establishment of AMBER Alert plans in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands and the expansion of the program into Indian Country and our northern and southern borders mark an important

milestone in our efforts to prevent child abductions. No matter where a child is abducted, communities and law enforcement work together to recover missing children quickly and safely. The numbers of recovered children speak for themselves. In 2001, only two children were recovered due to AMBER Alert. To date, 495 children have been recovered because of the AMBER Alert system. Expansion of the AMBER Alert is making a difference in saving children's lives.

### **What are the criteria for issuing AMBER Alerts?**

Each state AMBER Alert plan includes its own criteria for issuing AMBER Alerts. The PROTECT Act, passed in 2003, which established the role of AMBER Alert Coordinator within the Department of Justice, calls for the Department of Justice to issue minimum standards or guidelines for AMBER Alerts that states can adopt voluntarily. The Department's Guidance on Criteria for Issuing AMBER Alerts is as follows:

- Law enforcement must confirm that an abduction has taken place
- The child is at risk of serious injury or death
- There is sufficient descriptive information of child, captor or captor's vehicle to issue an Alert
- The child must be 17 years old or younger
- It is recommended that immediate entry of AMBER Alert data be entered into the FBI's National Crime Information Center. Text information describing the circumstances surrounding the abduction of the child should be entered, and the case flagged as Child Abduction.

Most states' guidelines adhere closely to the Department of Justice's recommended guidelines.

### **How are AMBER Alert appropriations spent?**

To date, the Department of Justice has utilized appropriated funds to create a national network and provide the states and territories with training and technical assistance to develop and enhance their AMBER Alert plans.

### **Have there been any successes or failures of the AMBER Alert system?**

Everyone from law enforcement to government to broadcasters has worked very hard to make the AMBER Alert system a success. Although there is much work left to do, the progress made has been significant. All 50 states, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and several Native American tribes now have AMBER Alert plans. To date, 495 children have been recovered due to the AMBER Alert. The Department of Justice holds localized training for law enforcement nationwide to familiarize them with the AMBER Alert system.

### **Can AMBER Alerts be issued across state and jurisdictional lines?**

Absolutely. Many states have formal memorandums of understanding with other states and there are currently 29 regional plans. If law enforcement has reason to believe that the child has been taken across state lines, the AMBER state coordinator will ask that

state to issue an alert. Many states have informal agreements with other states to issue AMBER Alerts upon request.

### **Are AMBER Alerts issued for all missing children?**

AMBER Alerts are issued for abducted children when the situation meets the AMBER Alert criteria. Some children wander away in a crowded grocery store, others might run off after a heated argument. When a child is missing, law enforcement can act swiftly to help recover the child, by developing search and rescue teams or by bringing dogs to the scene to track the scent, for example. AMBER Alert is only one tool that law enforcement can use to find abducted children. AMBER Alerts should be reserved for those cases that meet the AMBER criteria. Overuse of AMBER Alert could result in the public becoming desensitized to Alerts when they are issued.

### **What happens if a child's disappearance does not meet the AMBER Alert criteria?**

Law enforcement recognizes the need to act swiftly to help recover any missing child. Sometimes when a child goes missing, there are no witnesses to the disappearance; however there is reason to believe the child is in danger. In light of this concern, the Department of Justice launched an initiative to train Child Abduction Response Teams (CART) nationwide which are designed to assist local law enforcement agencies when they respond to incidents of missing and abducted children. The teams include regional law enforcement investigators, forensic experts, AMBER Alert coordinators, search and rescue professionals, policy makers, crime intelligence analysts, victim service providers and other interagency resources.

CART builds upon the success of the AMBER Alert program. Since AMBER Alerts are issued when a child abduction meets the specific AMBER Alert criteria, CART can be used for all missing children's cases, can be deployed as part of an AMBER Alert, or when a child is abducted or missing, but the abduction/disappearance does not meet the AMBER Alert criteria. CART can also be used to recover runaway children if they are under 18 and are in danger. To date, 225 Child Abduction Response teams (CART) have been trained, to include teams in 43 states, Washington D.C., Puerto Rico, the Bahamas and Canada.

### **What are Wireless AMBER Alerts?**

The Wireless AMBER Alerts Initiative is a voluntary partnership between the wireless industry, the United States Department of Justice, and the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC), to distribute AMBER Alerts to wireless subscribers who opt in to receive the messages and are able to receive text messages on their wireless devices. For information on this initiative, see [Wireless AMBER Alerts™ Frequently Asked Questions](#).

For more information visit [www.amberalert.gov](http://www.amberalert.gov).

Updated January 2010