

REMARKS

OF

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AT THE

NATIONAL AMBER ALERT SYMPOSIUM

ON

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Thank you, Jim [Walters]. It's great to be here in Orlando speaking to so many hard-working professionals about the safety of our nation's kids.

I'd like to thank Jim and our partners at Fox Valley Technical College for putting together this symposium and for the good work they do throughout the year to support the AMBER Alert network.

I also want to be sure to thank our good friends at the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. NCMEC is a lodestar in the field of child protection, and an icon in public safety. Their role in building and strengthening the AMBER Alert program, especially the secondary distribution network, has been central. The Department of Justice is grateful for their contributions.

I'd like to give a nod to my fellow speakers – Mr. Handberg, Assistant Special Agent Harper and Special Agent Banks. It's a privilege to join you on stage. You represent hundreds of thousands of dedicated law enforcement professionals across the country. This week, during National Police Week, we salute you and your colleagues for your outstanding service on behalf of America's communities.

I know we'll also hear a little later from two parents who endured the trauma of having their children abducted – Pamela Foster and Amy Bloxom. I want to express my appreciation, and my admiration, for their willingness to come forward and share their experience, as painful as it must be.

And finally, to everyone here – law enforcement officers, AMBER Alert coordinators, state clearinghouse managers and Child Abduction Response Team members – we thank you for being part of this conversation and for the tremendous work you do to keep our children safe.

One of the privileges of serving as head of the Office of Justice Programs is the satisfaction of knowing you're working with amazing people on behalf of a just cause. It's hard to think of a cause more worthy than the safety of our children, and it's hard to think of a group of people who've done more on behalf of that cause than all of you.

Just listen to what you've done. Over the last five years, from 2013 through 2017, you've issued and responded to 936 AMBER Alerts involving 1,200 children. Last year alone, you responded to 200 AMBER Alerts involving 263 children in 38 states. For alerts issued during the seven-month period ending March 31<sup>st</sup> of this year, over 97 percent of children were recovered within three hours. That's remarkable.

The secondary distribution network, which amplifies public alert mechanisms, has been critical to the success of AMBER Alert. Last year, secondary distribution played a role in 94 percent of AMBER cases – so we owe a debt of thanks to our allies in the wireless, retail, and social and digital media fields.

These partnerships and alliances continue to grow, and so do our successes. Since the AMBER Alert program was launched more than 20 years ago, more than 920 abducted children have been safely recovered. That's almost a thousand kids who've been rescued from danger and returned to their families. It's truly a record to be proud of.

One of those kids is a four-year-old boy from Sandusky, Ohio. On March 13<sup>th</sup> of this year, his non-custodial mother and two other people followed his guardian's car, and once they caught up with it, they took the boy out of his car seat by force then fled with him at high speed. Authorities issued an AMBER Alert, and a truck driver who saw the car called the police. Officers responded quickly, stopped the vehicle and arrested the mother. The boy was returned safely to his guardian.

It's the kind of story you hear all too often, scores of times every year. And almost always, the result is a safe recovery.

It's hard to imagine that there was a time, not terribly long ago, when this incredible resource wasn't available. Kids would disappear, and whether they came home or not depended on some combination of good fortune, diligent detective work and the abductor's state of mind. There was no guarantee of their safe return.

Of course, a positive outcome is never guaranteed, but the statistics show that when AMBER Alert is part of the response, the odds are very high that an abducted child will come home safely.

My role as National AMBER Alert Coordinator is one of my most critical responsibilities, and one I take seriously. I take great pride in knowing that my agency, particularly our Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, plays such an important part in supporting the AMBER Alert network.

The AMBER Alert Training and Technical Assistance Program is probably our biggest contribution. It provides an array of onsite and online training courses that have benefitted more than 50,000 child protection professionals over the last five years.

We publish a quarterly newsletter, the *AMBER Advocate*, that reaches over 50,000 people. We host webinars and hold roundtables with parents and siblings of missing and abducted children. We've also trained more than 250 Child Abduction Response Teams. Twenty-three of those teams have gone through the rigorous CART Certification Program, and one of those elite groups is the Northwest Florida CART. I'm glad they're joining us today.

The training and technical assistance program is working especially hard with our tribal partners. The shocking abduction and murder of Ashlynn Mike in May of 2016 made clear that, for all the many benefits of AMBER Alert, we still had work to do to close serious gaps.

I'm pleased that, just a few weeks ago, Congress passed and President Trump signed into law the Ashlynnne Mike AMBER Alert in Indian Country Act. This new law will ensure that resources are available to help protect American Indian children and spare others the suffering that Pamela Foster and her family have endured.

In the meantime, the AMBER Alert Training and Technical Assistance Program and our partners at the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children are working closely with tribal officials to strengthen their capacity to respond. So far, we've trained more than 1,500 tribal first responders and child protection professionals.

We're also supporting work led by Fox Valley on a tribal database that serves as a one-stop shop of training and other resources dedicated to helping tribal officials protect kids. More than 7,300 separate users have paid nearly 10,000 visits to the information exchange platform over the last year. Our hope is that the database will give our tribal partners the tools they need to meet the challenges posed by abductions in Indian country.

In Indian country, and across the country, AMBER Alert is making a difference. Thanks to the terrific work that each of you is doing in your states and communities, child abductors are being stopped in their tracks. I would wager that the very existence of AMBER Alert has deterred criminals from carrying out their designs. There's no question that AMBER Alert is a potent public safety weapon and an enormous asset in our fight to protect children.

It's impressive to consider the progress we have made in 22 years. From the seed of an idea planted on a radio talk show, AMBER Alert has grown into something very powerful, and very special – a national force for good. What a way to honor the memory of a little girl who, today, might have had a child of her own to look out for.

Our investments in AMBER Alert redeem their value on a daily basis, and our debt of gratitude to all of you grows with every child who is safely recovered. We honor and appreciate your outstanding service, and we pledge our continued full support as you continue your outstanding work to protect our children and keep America's communities safe.

Thank you.

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