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CRS Report for Congress

Amber Alert Program Technology

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Summary

Amber Alerts (also referred to as AMBER plans) use technology to disseminate information about child abductions in a timely manner. Research has found that most abducted children murdered by their kidnappers are killed within three hours of the abduction. Prompt response to child abductions is therefore deemed critical by many. Amber Alert plans are voluntary partnerships including law enforcement agencies, highway departments, and communications companies that provide emergency alerts. Technologies used for alerts include the Emergency Alert System (EAS), highway messages boards, telephone alert systems, the Internet, text messaging, and e-mail. Over 100 communities have Amber Alert programs, and all 50 states have statewide alert plans. Because kidnappers can cross state lines with their victims, the Department of Justice will often be involved in responding to an abduction. For this and other reasons, there is increased federal involvement in and support of Amber Alert plans.

This report deals with technology and related policy issues. Other CRS reports discuss protective programs for minors and current legislation. This report will be updated to reflect significant changes in technology.

How Amber Alerts Work

Amber Alerts[1] (also referred to as AMBER[2]) use technology to disseminate information about child abductions in a timely manner. Typically an Amber Alert is triggered for children under 18 who are believed by law enforcement officers to have been abducted (except in cases of parental abduction). Research has found that most abducted children murdered by their kidnappers are killed within three hours of the abduction. Prompt response to child abductions is therefore deemed critical by many. Law enforcement officers are encouraged to send out an alert if circumstances indicate that the

[1] Named after Amber Hagerman, kidnaped and murdered in 1996. Websites with additional information include [http://codeamber.org/] and the site of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, [http://www.ncmec.org]. Both sites viewed January 9, 2008.

[2] For "America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response."

child is in harm's way, if they have sufficient descriptive information about the child and/or the abductor for an alert, and if they believe that the immediate broadcast of an alert will help. When there is information about a vehicle used in an abduction, this information will usually be transmitted to highway messages boards, if that technology is in place. While each plan sets its own parameters, most follow guidelines set by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC).

A typical Amber Alert, would include an Emergency Alert System (EAS) broadcast, alerts on highway message boards, and notifications to public service partners such as police, highway patrols and the field crews of public utilities. Also, networks such as Emergency Digital Information System (EDIS),[3] in California, allow law enforcement agencies to share information and photos, if available, with the public and news media. A number of counties and cities have Amber Alert programs that notify local residents using e-mail or telephone alert systems to aid in the recovery of abducted children. Alerts can also be sent by text messages to cell phones and other wireless devices. Cingular, Sprint Nextel, Verizon Wireless and T-Mobile are among the wireless service providers that participate in the Amber Alert network; subscribers can sign up for free text messages.[4] These systems have the advantage of targeting selected audiences by function or geographical location but may not be received in a timely manner; telephone alert systems, for example, can be blocked by call-screening technologies.

Amber Alerts and All-Hazards Warnings

Some states participate in a consortium that uses Internet technology customized for Amber Alerts.[5] Information about an Amber Alert is sent to a web portal and reconfigured for different types of broadcasting, including cell phones, pagers, e-mail, highway signs, TV news websites, and emergency communications center. The technology allows police officers to transmit details and photos through encrypted computer systems in patrol cars. Information, therefore, is disseminated both more quickly and more widely, maximizing the opportunity to find a missing child in the critical first three hours. The alert system is managed from a dedicated web portal that can be accessed by statewide or local systems. The software recognizes the reported locations of abductions and sends emergency messages to targeted areas.

Emergency Alert System (EAS)[6]

EAS sends emergency messages with the cooperation of broadcast radio and television and most cable television stations. Its most common use is for weather alerts.

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[3] The State of California has pioneered EDIS, designed, notably, to supplement EAS. EDIS provides digitized information through direct computer links and radio to public safety agencies, news media, and anyone with access to the Internet. See [http://www.edis.ca.gov/]. Viewed January 9, 2008.

[4] For more information, see [http://www.wirelessfoundation.org] and [https://www.wirelessamberalerts.org/index.jsp]. Both sites viewed January 9, 2008.

[5] For more information, see [http://www.amberalert911.com/]. Viewed January 9, 2008.

[6] See CRS Report RL32527, *Emergency Communications: The Emergency Alert System (EAS) and All-Hazard Warnings*, by Linda K. Moore.

EAS technology is also used in the Amber Alert programs administered in some states and communities. To facilitate transmittal, EAS messages are classified by types of events, which are coded. These event codes speed the recognition and retransmittal process at broadcast stations. For example, a tornado warning is TOR, evacuation immediate is EVI, a civil emergency message is CEM. When a message is received at the broadcast station, it can be relayed to the public either as a program interruption or, for television, a "crawl" at the bottom of the TV screen. Although broadcaster participation is mandatory for national alerts, the participation of broadcast and cable stations in state and local emergency announcements is voluntary.

In the early stages of Amber Alert program development the CEM (civil emergency) event code was used for EAS messages. In February 2002, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) added several new event and location codes for broadcast and cable stations to use; included was a Child Abduction Emergency (CAE) event code. Stations are not required to modify their equipment to recognize the new codes and many Amber Alerts are still coded as civil emergencies for transmission. New equipment installed by broadcast and cable stations after February 2004, however, must be able to receive and transmit the new codes.[7]

Presidential Initiatives and The Department of Justice[8]

Because kidnappers can cross state lines with their victims, the Department of Justice will often be involved in responding to an abduction. For this and other reasons there is increased federal involvement in and support of Amber Alert plans. However, critics are concerned about the possibility of false arrests, overzealous vigilantism, the release of sensitive information about minors, and confusion with homeland security alerts.

President George W. Bush and Congress have encouraged federal support for Amber Alerts. In October 2002, the President requested that the Department of Justice establish standards for the issuing and dissemination of Amber Alerts. On April 30, 2003, the president signed into law the PROTECT Act (P.L. 108-21), formally establishing the federal government's role in the Amber Alert system. The Office of Justice Programs, at the Department of Justice, now includes an Amber Alert division., the National AMBER Alert Initiative.[9] The Department of Justice, the Department of Transportation, NCMEC, broadcasters, and law enforcement officers collaborate on national strategies for the Amber Alert program. One collaborative initiative was to develop standard procedures for emergency call takers responding to a report of a missing or abused child. Members of the joint committee that developed the standard included the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials (APCO), the National Academies of Emergency Dispatch (NAED), the National Emergency Number Association (NENA), NCMEC, and the Department of Justice. The American National Standards Institute (ANSI) Board of

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[7] FCC, *Report and Order*, Docket No. 01-66, released February 22, 2002.

[8] Broader policy issues are discussed in CRS Report RL34050, *Missing and Exploited Children: Background, Policies, and Issues*, by Adrienne L Fernandes.

[9] See [http://www.amberalert.gov/]. Viewed January 9, 2008.

Standards Review approved the standard in December 2007 ("APCO American National Standard (ANS)1.101.1-2007).[10]

National Emergency Child Locator Center

The National Emergency Child Locator Center has been established within NCMEC, as required by the Homeland Security Appropriations Act, 2007 (P.L. 109-295, Title VI, Subtitle E).[11] The purpose of the center is to identify children separated from their families as the consequence of a disaster and reunite them expeditiously. NCMEC is to operate a toll-free call center, set up a website with information about displaced children, and take other steps to collect and disseminate information about the children and their families.

[10] APCO News, "New Standard Addresses Handling Reports of Missing Children," January 22, 2008 at [http://www.apcointl.org/new/news/missing-children-standard.php]. Viewed January 25, 2008.

[11] Sec. 689b, 120 STAT1449-1450.