

KNW-157
AMBER ALERT SYSTEM
AMATEUR RADIO'S ROLE

Updated and adapted from an original article by Pat Spencer, KD4PWL, www.kyham.net

By now, almost everyone has heard of the AMBER alert system. However, there are a few things about the system that we need to look at to make sure it is properly understood and reacted to.

AMBER--America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response--was created in 1996 as a legacy to 9-year-old Amber Hagerman, who was kidnapped while riding her bicycle in Arlington, Texas and then brutally murdered. After this heinous crime, Dallas-Fort Worth broadcasters teamed with local police to develop an early warning system to help find abducted children. It has grown into a national effort by law enforcement agencies and broadcasters.

So what is an "Amber Alert?" Some might consider any missing child as an AMBER situation. The fact is, not all missing child incidents will result in an AMBER alert. A child who has wandered away, or has been taken by a member of the family will not be considered as an AMBER situation. Any missing child situation should be reported, and if you can assist, you should. However, you probably won't see any alerts.

One of the leading reasons for child abduction is a custody battle between divorcing parents. Usually, this type of situation does not involve a threat to the safety or welfare of the child. There may, however be parental situations where the incident escalates and threat to the child is determined and an alert may be issued.

There are some differences in definitions in different areas. However, the Department of Justice Recommended Criteria is:

- There is reasonable belief by law enforcement that an abduction has occurred.
- The law enforcement agency believes that the child is in imminent danger of serious bodily injury or death.
- There is enough descriptive information about the victim and the abduction for law enforcement to issue an AMGER Alert to assist in the recovery of the child.
- The abduction is of a child aged 17 years or younger.
- The child's name and other critical data elements, including the Child Abduction flag, have been entered into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) system.

Amber Alerts are broadcast using the Emergency Alert System on TV and radio stations, "crawling announcements" over cable TV systems, posted on electronic signs on highways, alarm and text messages sent to cell phones, and technology is evolving on the Internet. Each community is different in its resources and methods of broadcast.

Amateur Radio's Role in AMBER Alerts

The primary role of amateur radio is that of an ordinary citizen. Common sense dictates that a child abduction incident is a law enforcement matter and those outside of law enforcement should take a secondary role and observe and report.

Much like our role during severe weather, we observe and report, and not “chase” the storm. If you come into contact with the suspect do not try to intervene. You should consider the suspect as a danger to yourself and others. Trying to capture or pursue the suspect could result in injury or death to you, the child, and/or innocent bystanders. The only action you should take is to notify your local law enforcement agency.

If you want to take an active role, take a moment during the time you call the police and they arrive to write down anything you observed. This information would include descriptions, license numbers, and other facts that will be important to identifying and apprehending the suspect. Human memory is volatile, and in the time between your call, and your interview with police officers facts can be forgotten, or confused with other facts you are trying to relay to them.

Amateur radio can also serve another role in assisting law enforcement agencies to identify and apprehend a child abductor. We have the ability to communicate information very quickly through a number of means. Don't be afraid to communicate the information to other amateur radio operators, and encourage them to contact police if they observe the suspect. The key to the AMBER system is to provide as many eyes and ears as possible to help the police.

If you have an existing relationship with your local police officials, offer your assistance in acting as an organized group of extra eyes. Work with them to develop a protocol where you might have an amateur respond to police headquarters, and conduct a net of observers. Do not, however do this on your own. Establish a relationship, and have a working plan with the agency before considering this. Otherwise you will be a hindrance instead of a help.

Above all else, remember that you must let your local law enforcement agency take the lead in the situation follow their instruction to the letter. Sure we have some special capabilities, but in a child abduction situation, we are only ordinary citizens. If the police agency politely refuses amateur radio assistance, thank them for their time, and continue on your way. Do remember, however to report any sightings of the suspect. It is the welfare of the child that takes priority over all other considerations.

Sources:

Texas Department of Public Safety - <http://www.dps.texas.gov/>

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children - <http://www.missingkids.com/home>

US Department of Justice - <http://www.justice.gov/>