



Child Abduction T.I.P.S. (Training, Information, Practices & Strategy)

Volume 7

March 5, 2019



The California AMBER Alert

Written by Captain Rick Campbell

It has been 17 years since former California Governor Grey Davis signed into law the California Child Safety AMBER Network, which was intended to resemble the original Amber Alert Program developed in Texas in response to the 1996 abduction and murder of 9-year old Amber Hagerman. The law designated the California Highway Patrol (CHP) as the Statewide AMBER Alert Coordinator. With this new responsibility, the CHP created the Emergency Notification and Tactical Alert Center (ENTAC) to serve as a centralized point-of-contact for law enforcement agencies investigating child abductions. ENTAC, which operates 24-hours a day, assists law enforcement agencies with the activation of AMBER Alerts across California and coordinates with other states when multi-state activations are requested.

The current criteria authorizing an AMBER Alert activation reads as follows (per Government Code 8594):

If a law enforcement agency receives a report that (1) an abduction has occurred or that a child has been taken by anyone, including, but not limited to, a custodial parent or guardian, and (2) the agency determines that a child 17 years of age or younger, or an individual with a proven mental or physical disability, has been abducted or taken and (3) the victim is in imminent danger of serious bodily injury or death, and (4) there is information available that, if disseminated to the general public, could assist in the safe recovery of the victim, the agency, through a person authorized to activate the Emergency Alert System, shall, absent extenuating investigative needs, request activation of the Emergency Alert System within the appropriate local area. A law enforcement agency shall only request activation of the Emergency Alert System pursuant to this subdivision if these requirements are met. The Emergency Alert System is not intended to be used for abductions resulting from custody disputes that are not reasonably believed to endanger the life or physical health of a child.

Historically, the CHP needed to contact federal partners to broadcast an AMBER Alert across the Emergency Alert System (EAS) and to initiate a Wireless Emergency Alert (WEA) System message to cellular devices. However, as a result of federal efforts to improve and share access to the Integrated Public Alert Warning System (IPAWS) nationwide, ENTAC now accesses the EAS directly, which saves crucial time in information dissemination across cable, television, and radio networks. Additionally, the IPAWS allows ENTAC to access the WEA System directly and send what appears to be a text message to cellular devices in targeted geographic areas. As a result, millions of consumers with WEA-capable devices and services are rapidly armed with potentially lifesaving information.

Due to the limited number of characters available through the WEA, ENTAC embeds a link in each message that takes the user to a CHP created Twitter page dedicated solely to posting flyers that contain photos of the victim(s), suspect(s), and suspect vehicle(s) of AMBER, Silver, and Blue Alerts with the primary intent of turning every recipient into a member of the search party. ENTAC was the first agency in the nation to embed a live link in a WEA message and, has been identified as the national standard by Twitter for maximizing use of their platform for the mass, rapid dissemination of Alert information to the media, allied law enforcement, and public.

The CHP ENTAC will continue to seek new and novel methods and partners to rapidly and broadly disseminate AMBER Alert information on behalf of law enforcement agencies investigating child abductions.

HOW TO START A Cal MACI RESPONSE TEAM

Written by Marlene Glusing

“Once it started it was too late to plan, only time to react.” This is a quote from a law enforcement official. I work as a Legal Assistant in the Child Abduction Unit in Merced County’s District Attorney’s office. When I read this quote, I knew that I wanted to make sure the county where I live and work, Merced County, would be prepared in the event of an abduction, especially a stranger abduction, where there usually isn’t a family member to start with as a suspect. I wanted our county to be proactive as opposed to reactive. Merced County has a couple of police agencies with only 10 officers, and I knew that a stranger abduction case would be especially overwhelming to them. I also knew that all of the police agencies in Merced County would need multi agency support and resources. I started by obtaining approval from my District Attorney, Larry Morse, to develop a plan to form a response team and to approach the various agencies in Merced County, using the help and support from Cal OES and the Center for Innovation and Resources, Inc. (CIR). I met with the various Chiefs of Police and the Merced County Sheriff to discuss the California Missing and Abducted Children's Initiative (Cal MACI) and I provided them with a brochure explaining the program and benefits to the County, such as developing a plan specific to Merced County to better utilize existing resources for a quicker and more organized response.

I received a great response from the law enforcement agencies, so I then contacted the other agencies which we felt would be beneficial to the team: the County Office of Education, the local women’s shelter, Child Protective Services, Probation, the Department of Mental Health, Cal Fire, State Parole, and Victim/Witness Services from the District Attorney’s Office, and they all agreed to participate.

Once we had a list of participants from each of these agencies, we attended a week-long training on how to build a team, taught by Bill Hammond & Georgia Hilgeman-Hammond, with funding provided through Cal OES and the State Task Force. During that training we developed:

- A Mission Statement - To coordinate efforts of county-wide agencies to effectively enhance our response to the needs of families and the community, focusing on the location, recovery and reintegration of missing and/or abducted children into a safe environment.
- A list of goals – including establishing an organizational structure of the team to ensure our goals are met, to educate and promote the community and non-profit organization on the Cal MACI team, to identify the various cultures without Merced County with regarding to missing and abducted children, and to develop a Memorandum of Understanding between the agencies.

It is important to meet often while developing your Team and then have follow-up meetings as information and ideas arise. Since the training, we have had several meetings to organize our team and fulfill our goals. We attended a county-wide Chiefs Meeting and reported our progress, and also requested a list of resources their agencies would be able to provide in the event of an abduction, and we then developed one county-wide list.

This Team is very beneficial to Merced County and would be beneficial to other counties as well. The Team will help Merced County be prepared to respond swiftly and effectively in the event of a child abduction. Other counties would similarly benefit by setting up their own Teams. If you would like more information about how to establish your own team, please contact me at mglusing@co.merced.ca.us.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

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