

# AMBER Alert Technology Conference Memphis, Tennessee December 3-4, 2003

## Conference Proceedings Report

### **Background and Overview**

On August 3-5, 2003, the Department of Justice hosted a national conference on AMBER (America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response) Alert in Dallas, Texas, to encourage communication and collaboration, improve AMBER Alert programs and processes, raise understanding and awareness about issues related to missing children, and provide an opportunity for jurisdictions to work together to develop a seamless AMBER Alert network.

Teams from each locality, State, region, territory, and the District of Columbia were invited to participate in this event. Teams were led by the AMBER plan coordinator and included the president or designee from the State Broadcasters Association, a local law enforcement representative responsible for implementing the AMBER Alert plan in his or her jurisdiction, and a highway safety coordinator or other State department of transportation representative who works with the AMBER Alert program in each State. The conference was attended by 287 AMBER Alert representatives.

As a follow-up to the August conference, on December 3-4, 2003, in Memphis, Tennessee, the Department of Justice conducted a Technology Conference to provide a forum in which AMBER Alert coordinators could learn about the different technology options now available to support their programs. The conference was designed to give technology vendors an opportunity to showcase their products and services, to give AMBER Alert program representatives an opportunity to learn about the various technologies that are available, and to facilitate working business meetings of the AMBER Alert coordinators as a follow-up to the meetings that took place in Dallas.

The remainder of this report provides a summary of the conference.

### **Conference Summary**

The Technology Conference was attended by 65 AMBER Alert coordinators and 19 technology vendors. (A list of vendors is included in appendix A.) The conference included presentations on ways to develop and enhance AMBER Alert plans, a discussion of the importance of XML

standards, and inspirational remarks by Ed Smart, father of Elizabeth Smart who was abducted in 2002 and recovered in 2003. A technology fair followed the presentations during which time AMBER Alert state coordinators met with each vendor. The conference concluded with regional business meetings. (A copy of the conference agenda is included in appendix B; conclusions and findings from the breakout sessions are contained in appendix C.)

Participants indicated that the conference achieved its intended objective of providing an opportunity to learn about the technologies that are available to support AMBER Alert programs.<sup>1</sup> They also indicated that the conference succeeded in providing them with an opportunity to discuss their progress following the Dallas conference, as well as in providing information about the issues that should be addressed prior to securing additional products and services.<sup>2</sup> Participants also indicated that the conference provided them with information about follow-up technical assistance and training strategies,<sup>3</sup> as well as meaningful discussions on the importance of XML standards for the AMBER Alert program.

### **Recommendations**

Participants were asked to suggest possible topics for future training and technical assistance sessions. Their suggestions fall into categories similar to the Dallas conference, as follows.

#### ***Memoranda of Understanding (MOU's)***

- Participants expressed a need for a template that describes MOU components and a need to develop national minimum standards for MOU's, including statewide and interstate MOU's.

#### ***Activation Criteria***

- Participants expressed a need for more specific information about the contents and components of an effective State plan. They would like to see a matrix developed listing the components of AMBER plans across the country.

#### ***Quality Control, Oversight, and Evaluation***

- Participants emphasized the need for national standards and criteria, model policies, and uniform procedures.

#### ***Alert Activation Protocol***

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<sup>1</sup> Rating of 4.31 on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being strongly agree and 1 being strongly disagree.

<sup>2</sup> Rating of 4.09 on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being strongly agree and 1 being strongly disagree.

<sup>3</sup> Rating of 3.61 on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being strongly agree and 1 being strongly disagree.

- Participants expressed a need for better explanations of EAS, EMNET, and NOAA. They also expressed a need for more information about department of transportation rules and regulations.

### ***Technologies to Support Activations***

- Participants expressed a need for creation of national standards governing the use of various technologies.
- Participants spoke about the importance of sharing information about technologies that have been implemented across the country in terms of what is and is not effective. They also spoke about the need for additional training on investigative technologies.
- Participants expressed a need for assistance in improving the EAS system.

### ***Training***

- Participants spoke about the importance of information sharing and the need for continuing opportunities to discuss plans and collaborate with other AMBER Alert programs.
- Participants expressed a need for training for dispatchers, road patrols, investigators, emergency coordinators, first responders, and other team members such as law enforcement, transportation, and media/broadcast personnel.
- Participants asked for information and training on best practices---that is, what works---as it relates to program development and implementation, processes, procedures, and strategies.
- Participants indicated that information and training are needed on the role of State missing children clearinghouses and nonprofit organizations.
- Participants spoke of the need for education and training for the public, including the development of public service announcements.
- Participants identified the need for ideas and information on prevention.
- Participants identified several mechanisms for providing ongoing training and technical assistance to AMBER Alert programs, including video conferencing, regional meetings, Web-based training, and portable guides and other resources.

## **Conclusions**

The Technology Conference provided participants with an opportunity to learn about new technologies and to continue discussions with others in their region and across the country on what works and what does not, program enhancements and improvements, and inter- and intra-State collaboration. The recommendations generated through the conference will be used to design and develop ongoing training and technical assistance programs that will focus on enhancing individual AMBER Alert systems, improving local responses, and creating a seamless nationwide AMBER Alert network.

# Appendix A

## List of Vendors

## Appendix A List of Vendors

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## Appendix B

### Technology Conference Agenda

**AMBER Alert Technology Conference**  
**Memphis, Tennessee**  
**December 3-4, 2003**

Wednesday, December 3

- 7:00 am - 8:15 am    **Registration**  
**Room:** Grand Ballroom Foyer North
- 7:30 am - 8:15 am    **Continental Breakfast**  
**Room:** Grand Salon C
- 8:45 am - 9:00 am    **Opening and Welcome Remarks**  
**Room:** Grand Salon A  
Assistant Attorney General Deborah J. Daniels  
Ed Smart, Father of Elizabeth Smart
- 8:45 am - 9:00 am    **Conference Strategy and Housekeeping Issues**  
**Room:** Grand Salon A  
Ron Laney, Associate Administrator, Child Protection Division
- 9:00 am - 9:30 am    **Setting the Stage: Next Steps in Developing and Enhancing  
AMBER Alert Plans**  
**Room:** Grand Salon A  
Phil Keith, Chief, Knoxville Police Department  
This session will provide an overview of some of the critical first steps  
that need to be addressed in the planning, development, or enhancement of  
an AMBER Alert program. The focus will be, "How to Get Your House in  
Order."
- 9:30 am - 10:30 am    **XML: What Does it Mean and Why Is it Important?**  
**Room:** Grand Salon A  
Pat McCreary and Ken Gill, Bureau of Justice Assistance, U.S.  
Department of Justice  
The presenters will discuss, in plain language, the meaning of XML and  
its relevance to the AMBER Alert program. A question-and-answer period  
will follow the presentation.
- 10:30 am - 10:45 am    **Break**

Wednesday, December 3 (continued)

**Technology Fair (Grand Salon B)**

- 10:45 am - 11:15 am **Technology Fair - Round 1**
- 11:15 am - 11:45 am **Technology Fair - Round 2**
- 11:45 am - 1:00 pm **Lunch on Own**
- 1:00 pm - 1:30 pm **Technology Fair - Round 3**
- 1:30 pm - 2:00 pm **Technology Fair - Round 4**
- 2:00 pm - 2:30 pm **Technology Fair - Round 5**
- 2:30 pm - 3:00 pm **Technology Fair - Round 6**
- 3:00 pm - 3:30 pm **Technology Fair - Round 7**
- 3:30 pm - 4:00 pm **Technology Fair - Round 8**
- 4:00 pm - 4:30 pm **Technology Fair - Round 9**
- 4:30 pm - 5:00 pm **Technology Fair - Round 10**
- 5:00 pm - 5:30 pm **Technology Fair - Round 11**
- 5:30 pm - 6:00 pm **Technology Fair - Round 12**

Thursday, December 4, 2003

7:30 am - 8:30 am **Continental Breakfast**  
**Room:** Grand Salon C

**Technology Fair (Grand Salon B)**

8:30 am - 9:00 am **Technology Fair - Round 13**

Thursday, December 4, 2003 (continued)

9:00 am - 9:30 am **Technology Fair - Round 14**

9:30 am - 10:00 am **Technology Fair - Round 15**

10:00 am - 10:30 am **Technology Fair - Round 16**

10:30 am - 11:00 am **Technology Fair - Round 17**

11:00 am - 11:30 am **Technology Fair - Round 18**

11:30 am - 12:00 pm **Technology Fair - Round 19**

12:00 pm - 12:30 pm **Technology Fair - Round 20**

12:30 pm - 1:45 pm **Lunch on Own**

1:45 pm - 4:00 pm **Business Meetings: Progress Review of State and Regional Plans**

**Room:** Grand Salon A

The purpose of this breakout session is to give participants an opportunity to share ideas obtained during the technology fair and to discuss progress and actions that have taken place following the Dallas conference. Technical assistance needs and strategies also will be discussed.

## Appendix C

### Regional Breakout Sessions Findings and Conclusions



# Appendix C

## Regional Breakout Sessions

### Findings and Conclusions

#### SOUTH

##### DETERMINING TECHNOLOGY READINESS

- Should DOJ rate each vendor?
- Should AMBER Alerts be:
  - A subset to another type of alert system?
  - Linked to Homeland Security alerts?
- Are technologies for AMBER Alerts already in place in communities?
- There are wide variations in the technologies:
  - Prices vary considerably.
  - Many systems are not tested.
  - Vendor reliability is not known.
- Should nationwide system specifications be developed to ensure system compatibility?
- Attention should be placed on the cost of each system/technology as it relates to value and activation.
- Currently vendors seem to be driving the market, when they should be asking what is needed, not making that determination on their own.
- When selecting any technology, the audience, purpose, and intent should be noted (in other words, is the technology for the public and/or for transportation, broadcast/media, or law enforcement personnel?)
- Future technologies include reaching cell phone customers---what is the role/position of the Federal Government on this issue?
- Vendors must consider and honor MOU's.
- AMBER Alerts are not for every child who is missing--other alert mechanisms should be developed and used by local agencies for near AMBER Alerts.
- States should establish procedures for purchasing technologies. The process should include a "business plan" and needs assessment.
- The AMBER Alert system needs to be coordinated with State-level alert programs and/or planning systems. Data standards should be acknowledged and adhered to.
- Technical assistance is needed to support the acquisition of technology.
- Good products are available to support AMBER Alert systems. Coordinators should share information with one another.
- As the demand for AMBER Alerts increases, so does the importance of specific criteria and guidelines.
- Who are potential secondary AMBER Alert partners? What is their role? What are the terms and conditions for their involvement and receipt of information?
- What is the potential for fundraising?

#### TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND TRAINING NEEDS

- Training and information for first responders.
- Guidelines for preliminary investigations.
- Training the media (need to identify potential trainers).
- Training on NCIC data quality issues.
- Identify existing training materials and programs (Fox Valley Technical College, National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, Houston).
- Use technology for increasing first-level training.
- Creation of an AMBER resource repository.
- General public service announcements?
- Checklist for departments on tips.
- Information and training on interstate AMBER Alerts and activations.
- Information and training on AMBER Alerts and use of NCIC:
  - How it should work.
  - Interstate issues.
- Leads management system.

## WEST

### GETTING YOUR HOUSE IN ORDER

- A chart and/or matrix should be developed to show the AMBER Alert systems and services in all 50 States.
- IT folks should be involved in selection of the technology to ensure compatibility with existing in-house or in-State systems.
- Funding requests and system purchases need to be coordinated with agencies dealing with FEMA, Department of Health, and Homeland Security.
- A needs assessment should be conducted of the service area prior to looking at a technology.
- Plans should drive the technology, not vice versa.
- Company references should be examined before any purchase or negotiations. Be sure to ask where the system currently operates prior to making a selection or purchase.
- Look at the legal, liability, and privacy issues prior to purchasing a technology.
- Determine the applicability of the technology.
- Much of the technology demonstrated was unrealistic for the cost.
- Competition among vendors may result in some improvements and enhancements to existing technologies.
- States should piggyback their AMBER Alert plans to Homeland Security and emergency management systems.
- The Federal Government should insist that Homeland Security as well as FEMA plans and moneys are linked to AMBER.
- The Federal Government should look at upgrading the NOAA weather system for use of AMBER nationwide.
- States would like to know what free technology and services NCMEC will be offering prior to purchasing products of their own.
- Thought should be given to establishing a national advisory group made up of regional AMBER representatives who could assist in setting national standards for the technology, identifying system best practices, and conducting evaluations.

### LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE TECHNOLOGY FAIR

- Although money does not seem to be available from the Federal Government for technology, many vendors allude to free-flowing pots of funds.
- States should stay focused on the core components of the AMBER Alert system before venturing into enhancements.
- States should coordinate with FEMA, Homeland Security, and the Department of Health on AMBER system enhancements.
- Most every system demonstrated at the conference was more of an enhancement than a must have.
- Some good ideas demonstrated by some of the vendors could be implemented in States for little or no cost.
- States would like to see more materials and technologies related to prevention.

- Public-private partnerships could serve as mechanisms to fund or implement enhancements.
- Hidden costs---such as the costs associated with training and ongoing operation and maintenance---should not be forgotten.
- Systems should be user friendly.
- States would like technical assistance on how to conduct a needs assessment.

#### WHERE ARE WE NOW

- Basic AMBER Alert programs are in place. Most have been activated or tested.
- A range of partners have been incorporated, including:
  - Lottery commissions.
  - Utilities.
  - AOL.
  - 511/CARS.
  - Text messages/public.
  - Highway/commercial signs.
- Review committees have been established.
- Criteria are becoming standardized.
- Public awareness is greater.
- Checklists, publications, and training programs are being developed.
- AMBER Alert systems are enlisting mutual aid with other jurisdictions.

#### WHERE ARE WE GOING

- Greater assessment and coordination of local, regional, and statewide plans.
- MOU's have been established, both interstate and international.
- Training videos need to be developed.
- More partners need to be incorporated.
- Grants for resources such as phone banks are needed.
- Training for broad audiences is needed and is being developed.

#### WHAT WE NEED

- Assessment of plans, capabilities, and streamlining of processes.
- Identification and coordination of funding.
- DOJ's vision of AMBER needs to be communicated.
- Assistance is needed with interagency and international MOU's.
- Training and publications need to be developed, including a resource library of other States' AMBER training materials, publications, and other resource materials.
- Lists of sponsors and corporations used in each State need to be developed.
- A matrix showing each State's AMBER plan should be created.

## **MIDWEST**

### MOU's

- Model national MOU's that address liability issues and minimum standards (i.e., best practices) should be developed.

### MINIMUM STANDARDS

- Minimum standards for criteria and activation are needed.

### OVERSIGHT AND EVALUATION

- Minimum standards are needed.
- A clearinghouse for enhancements should be developed and the information should be disseminated to all AMBER Alert programs.
- Guides and case study models should be drafted.

### TECHNOLOGIES

- Technology education and training are needed.
- An 800 phone number for technology assistance would be helpful.
- Basic technology standards should be developed.
- A Rapid Start program (similar to that used for managing leads) should be created.

### EDUCATION AND TRAINING ARE NEEDED:

- For all AMBER Alert partners.
- For broadcasters on when and how often to run an alert.
- For all partners on alert activation protocols.
- On phone bank issues.
- On best practices.

## EAST

### BEFORE BUYING A TECHNOLOGY:

- Have a well-established operating plan.
- Clarify system flexibility.
- Conduct an inventory of what you have and what exists within your State and region.
- Look at existing operating options.
- Determine who else currently uses the system.
- Identify someone with expertise to buy.
- Identify hidden costs, pitfalls, and service demands.
- Identify competitors and make distinctions among vendors.
- Identify the primary purpose and objectives of the technology.
- Identify funding sources, realities, and availability.
- Identify the ongoing cost of systems and upgrades.
- Determine the applicability of technologies:
  - \_ Does it get the message out to the main conduit?
  - \_ Does it connect with existing conduits---connectivity?
  - \_ In a multiteam approach, which tier or partner agency does the technology address?
  - \_ Can the company and its products be incorporated into the AMBER system?
  - \_ Does it fix EAS? Is this its purpose?
  - \_ Does it reach the proper audience?

### ADDRESSING NEEDS: WHAT IS OUT THERE AND WHAT IS NEEDED?

- Technology exists to hit every wireless with message.
- AT&T can hit all theirs now.
- Many people are trying to commercialize AMBER alert.
- Additional funding is needed.
- “Let the buyer beware” of products and promises.
- Some vendors are trying to make money behind the banner of being a nonprofit.
- Research, development, and standards are needed.
- Training for line personnel is needed.
- Vendors need to understand that coordinators drive plans---not vendors or technology.
- Hidden agendas should be identified.
- AMBER Alert coordinators should communicate with each other about both positive and negative experiences. They should also help in the development of a forum for doing so.

### VENDOR ISSUES

- Most don't understand the needs of the program.
- Vendors must address the core mission of the program.
- There are concerns about sending alerts beyond a jurisdiction without communicating with each other.
- What about near AMBER's?

- What is the implication of a technology being sold to a jurisdiction within a specific State or region? What does this mean for the rest of the region?

#### WHAT DO WE NEED TO DO: NEXT STEPS

- Enhance communication.
- Develop Web sites.
- Increase testing.
- Establish additional partnerships (i.e., with the lottery commission, trucking associations, and so forth).
- Create a committee for software development.
- Upgrade EAS.
- Develop MOU's.
- Reassess protocols.
- Establish separate program (Washington, DC).
- Review communication systems.
- Continue outreach and education.

#### WHAT IS NEEDED

- Technical support.
- Training.
- Connectivity.
- Funding.
- Testing.
- National MOU.
- Process for separating DC/MD/Northern VA plan.
- Regional MOU's.
- Continued communications.
- Indemnification of broadcasters.