

COMMENTS TO CONGRESS ON:  
*RUNAWAY, HOMELESS AND MISSING CHILDREN—PERSPECTIVES ON HELPING THE  
NATION’S VULNERABLE YOUTH*  
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**THE PROBLEM**

During 2006 there were 662,228 children reported missing in the United States and 60,729 in my home State of Texas (The National Crime Information Center, 2007). In Texas, 5,182 of those cases remained active at the end of 2006, and I lie awake at night wondering if we will be able to recover all of those missing children.

Any child who is away from a stable and loving home is a child at risk. No child chooses to be marginalized. Children never knowingly make a choice to expose themselves to exploitation and victimization. A child who chooses to run away is always running from a bad place to what they hope is a better place. They do not consciously choose to become vulnerable to predators and exploiters. It has often been said that children are our most valuable resource, but this is not reflected in our practices as a society.

The National Runaway Switchboard reports between 1.6 and 2.8 million youth run away in a year and that youth aged 12 to 17 are at higher risk for homelessness than adults<sup>1</sup>. Despite these startling statistics, law enforcement training academies are not required to provide *any* Amber Alert or missing persons investigative tools, training, or resources. Local nonprofit agencies must fill the void.

**THE SOLUTION: LOCAL NONPROFIT LEADERSHIP AND COLLABORATION**

Harris County, Texas, represents Texas Center for the Missing’s largest client base. Harris is the largest of the 13 counties in Texas Center for the Missing’s primary service area and has a larger population than 24 states in U. S.. From 2005 to 2006, the number of children reported missing rose from 11,648 to 14,809 and in Harris County alone, from 8,905 to 11,134 – both of these represent more than a 25% increase! **Might I repeat, this is a 25% increase in just one year.** Despite these alarming numbers, there is no dedicated funding for local prevention efforts or law enforcement investigation and response.

Yes, there is some good news. Strategic partnerships are being formed across the United States and North America. Collaborative efforts like Project Safe Childhood and regional Child Abduction Response Teams are set to have a significant impact through both prevention and recovery of missing children. However, neither of these vital projects is funded. Local organizations are required to tap into their already stretched budgets to provide the people, the time, the resources, and the coordination to make these efforts successful.

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<sup>1</sup> Hammer, H; Finkehor, D. & Sedlak, A. (2002). Runaway/Thrownaway Children: National Estimates and Characteristics. National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Thrownaway Children. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

## ROLES OF TEXAS CENTER FOR THE MISSING: *A MODEL FOR LOCAL EFFORTS*

Texas Center for the Missing offers, or coordinates the delivery of, services to meet the needs of the entire spectrum of missing persons issues. I would encourage other communities to implement a similar comprehensive community child safety plan that should include:

- Programs to educate parents and caregivers in the ways to safeguard children on the streets and on the Internet, and exactly what to do, step-by-step, if a child does go missing;
- Encouraging families to discuss safety issues and to create their own emergency response plan;
- Programs to educate our children in ways to stay safe in our community and on the Internet, and alternatives to running away;
- Fast public notification of a missing child via the Amber Alert for abducted children, or other systems for those missing children who were not abducted;
- Timely, coordinated responses to endangered missing child incidents; and
- Follow-up and aftercare for victims and families.

Texas Center for the Missing's advocacy and support services for victims and their families include guidance in reporting and finding a missing or abducted child, guidance in finding a runaway child, a resource database for abduction survivors and their families, and liaison support between families and law enforcement including case management, reunification, and information and referral services.

### *Amber Alert*

The National Center on Missing and Exploited Children reports that there are 121 Amber Alert programs across the United States credited with recovering 236 children. In the 13-county Houston Region, covering more than 12,000 square miles and a population of more than 5.5 million people, we have issued 65 Amber Alerts representing 70 children. Of these, children in 58 cases were recovered safely, 3 were found deceased, and 4 remain missing. This is an 89% success rate and exemplifies what a powerful tool the Amber Alert can be.

The Amber Alert has made a huge difference in missing child cases; however, it is imperative to understand what the Amber Alert *is* and what it *is not*. The Amber Alert *is* a very effective tool for law enforcement to enlist help in tracking down an abductor, the abductor's vehicle or the missing child. It *is* a way for the media and the general public to assist in the recovery of an innocent child and a malicious predator.

The Amber Alert *is not* a panacea. It *will never* replace a thorough, efficient, and effective law enforcement investigation. It *will not* replace vigilant supervision of children by trusted adults nor will it replace missing child prevention and education programs. It *will not* replace adequate prison sentences and good criminal justice supervision of probationers or parolees and, in particular, child sex offenders. Rapists and child molesters are serial offenders. It is well documented within the mental health community that most sex offenders are beyond

rehabilitation (“compared to non-sex offenders released from State prisons, released sex offenders were 4 times more likely to be rearrested for a sex crime.”<sup>2</sup>).

Law enforcement officers are the only ones who can issue an Amber Alert for an abducted child. It is a critical element in the resolution of a child abduction, but it is only a part of what we must do to keep children safe. We must each do our part by protecting children and responding when they are in danger. It is my fervent hope that someday soon we will not need the Amber Alert, the Child Abduction Response Team or a National Missing Children’s Day because all of our community’s children will be safe.

### **Southeast Texas Child Abduction Response Team (SETCART)**

The Southeast Texas Child Abduction Response Team (SETCART) is an effort to bring seasoned investigators, tenured prosecutors, search-and-rescue volunteers and victims’ advocates together to work the most urgent child abduction cases. The Southeast Texas Child Abduction Response Team will enable the immediate deployment of all necessary resources for qualifying cases and therefore positively impact these serious, life-threatening scenarios.

Texas Center for the Missing and the Houston Regional Amber Alert are providing leadership for the development and implementation of the Southeast Texas Child Abduction Response Team. Our effort was the first in Texas and serves the region that historically has the most missing child cases in the state. With over 150 law enforcement agencies in the Southeast Texas region, this is a Herculean effort that requires unbiased leadership and strong relationships within the community. Currently, more than 70 law enforcement agencies in our region have signed on to SETCART

SETCART is a multi-disciplinary, cross-jurisdictional, pre-planned and coordinated response to cases of endangered missing children and child abductions based upon a highly successful model system operating in Florida. While Florida has a state mandate and state funding with which to implement their CART process, Texas is not so fortunate. SETCART is a grassroots-driven effort in which participation is purely voluntary for all of our member agencies.

### **Missing Persons Response Kit**

Texas Center for the Missing has also developed a Missing Persons Response Kit for law enforcement agencies so that they have at their fingertips the tools and contacts to provide the fastest, most effective response in the critical period after a child is missing. Amber Alert and Missing Persons Investigation training is provided upon delivery of each resource kit. Contents of the Resource Kits can be found in Appendix A.

### **Southeast Texas Search and Rescue Alliance (SETSARA)**

One of the greatest achievements of Texas Center for the Missing has been the coordination of the **Southeast Texas Search and Rescue Alliance (SETSARA)**: a coalition of volunteer search-and-rescue groups and law enforcement partners. Prior to the creation of SETSARA, law enforcement had little confidence in the professionalism of search-and-rescue experts and, therefore, did not access this important resource. To compound the issue, there was a mutual

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<sup>2</sup> *Report on the Recidivism of Sex Offenders Released from Prison in 1994*. U.S. Department of Justice–Office of Justice Programs: Bureau of Justice Statistics.

feeling of distrust among the individual search-and-rescue groups so that communication was limited and duplication of efforts was common. Now local groups work together to offer effective and efficient search resources to law enforcement and the community.

Formed in 2001, SETSARA provides its membership with search training and public safety agencies (e.g., law enforcement, fire department, and wildlife agencies) with awareness, education, and search services. By providing necessary resources to law enforcement (and only the resources they need and request), we enable law enforcement agencies to focus on what they do best—*the investigation*.

### **Association of Missing and Exploited Children's Organizations (AMECO)**

AMECO is an organization of member agencies in the United States and Canada who provide services to families with missing and exploited children. Our mission is to build and nurture an association of credible, ethical and effective non-profit organizations that serve this vulnerable population.

In partnership with the National Center on Missing and Exploited Children and the International Center on Missing and Exploited Children, the member organizations of the Association of Missing and Exploited Children's Organizations, of which Texas Center for the Missing is one, serve hundreds of thousands of children and families each year.

These passionate, professional, caring staff and volunteers work diligently to protect children. Most of us feel it is a mission, a calling, and not just a job. However, we are truly fighting an uphill battle. Two things threaten the work we do: a lack of awareness on the part of the community and legislators about the severity of the problem, and the lack of funding to support these critical life-saving efforts.

Our greatest challenge has been that funding dollars are scarce while demand for our services continues to increase!

### **Crime-Stoppers**

Another collaborative partnership that Texas Center for the Missing has found to be successful is working with the local Crime Stoppers organization. Crime Stoppers of Houston works closely with Texas Center for the Missing and the Houston Amber Alert to maximize the publicity of open Amber Alert cases on the anniversary of the child's abduction. The press conferences convened by Crime Stoppers of Houston provide another tool for law enforcement agencies to secure leads in a cold case.

### **The Internet Threat**

I believe the battle to protect our children has moved, largely, from the street to the Internet. This is not good news. *Unfortunately, the Internet has re-defined who is accessible and expanded the victim pool exponentially.* A single predator can communicate with hundreds of children and set them up for victimization. Predators share their victims with other predators and manipulate children to self-exploit by sending explicit photos across the internet which are then shared among these heinous criminals.

Locally, Texas Center for the Missing participates in the US Attorney's Southern District Office efforts to implement this vital program. Prevention is key to educate children on the dangers they face online, as well as how to avoid self-exploitation. The very simple concept that, "Digital is forever." is often lost on the most impressionable in our society – young teenagers who are looking for "safe" ways to rebel against their parents and expand their boundaries as young adults. To address this issue, Texas Center for the Missing has developed a cadre of internet safety education programs which are modeled closely upon the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's NetSmartz program. Preventing a child from being abused or exploited is the ultimate goal in all of our educational programs. A complete list of our educational programs can be found in Appendix B.

### **Project Safe Childhood**

Guided by the leadership of the Attorney General, Project Safe Childhood (PSC) aims to combat the proliferation of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation crimes against children. The threat of sexual predators soliciting children for physical sexual contact is well-known and serious; the danger of the production, distribution, and possession of child pornography is equally dramatic and disturbing. The response to these growing problems must be coordinated, comprehensive, and robust. It must aim to investigate and prosecute vigorously as well as protect and assist victimized children. At the same time, it must recognize the need for a broad, community-based effort to protect our children and to guarantee to future generations the opportunity to grow safely into adulthood..

Project Safe Childhood is a definite step in the right direction, pulling together diverse teams working together to keep children safer online, to snare Internet Predators and prosecute them to the fullest. Unfortunately, the predators are cunning, incredibly technologically savvy and highly adaptable to all of the obstacles we place in front of them. We must arm ourselves better against this crime on all levels or we will remain seriously outgunned. As Attorney General Gonzales says, "*We can not prosecute our way out of this problem.*" Sadly, this program, too, is unfunded.

#### *Jenny's\* Story:*

In January, 2006, a petite, 15-year-old girl from League City, TX, was lured away over the Internet by a 26-year-old man who lived in her area. He picked her up, took her to his house, drugged and raped her and shared her with two of his friends, one of whom carved Xs with a razor blade from one of her pelvic bones across to the other. 18 months later she and her family are still struggling with their recovery while having to deal with the court, the DA's office and the fact that one of the perpetrators of this heinous crime is on the run and may never face justice. This traumatized victim and family strive everyday to get their lives back to normal.

Many civilians as well as law enforcement officers do not feel that internet lures are a danger or on some level believe that a child who leaves of their own volition is not endangered or does not deserve emergency response. Jenny's story exemplifies how a child's single poor choice can lead to a nightmarish experience that becomes a life sentence for and her entire family.

*\*Jenny's name has been changed to protect her identity.*

## NEXT STEPS

The U. S. Attorney General's *Project Safe Childhood, Jessica's Law*, which has been passed in various states across the country, and the recently passed *Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act* provide even greater support of programs to arm children and families as well as punish those who would rob our children of their innocence.

We are fortunate to have all of the partnerships and programs discussed in this document, but it will take all of us, working together, to truly protect our children. In the past, we could let our children play in the front yard without standing guard over them. In the past, we could put our children to bed at night and comfortably expect to find them safely there the next morning. Unfortunately, these two simple acts, and many more, can no longer be taken for granted. We have seen children snatched out of their yards and their school and play areas, off the streets in our communities, and from their very homes, that place we all think of as a haven.

### Funding

*Robert Cooke, whose daughter Rachel has been missing since January 2002 says "When I first met the director of Texas EquuSearch, he told me my wife Janet and I are now in a special club. It's a club no one wants to join. It's a club of sorrow and grief. It's the club of parents and families of missing children.*

*The club is full of emotions. There is anger at the person who took your loved one. The worst feeling of all is helplessness. What can I do? What haven't I done? We've posted flyers and passed out bumper stickers and buttons, but nothing has brought our Rachel home.*

*Many sleepless nights occur in the club. When you are able to sleep and you awake, you wake up to a reality far worse than any nightmare. The guilt is overwhelming. Why was I not there to protect her? Why didn't I teach her how to protect herself? I am her father; it was my job to protect her. Well, I say it's time to reduce the membership drive for this club".*

Nothing to which I have ever been exposed has affected me as deeply as this issue. I have never been more convinced that working together, caring people can make a difference. I have never been more convinced that we can, we *must*, do more to protect our children and keep their families from joining "the club."

Unfortunately, most people believe that the missing children problem is solely the province of law enforcement and is already well-funded by our tax dollars. As a result, concerned citizens are unaware of the need to support this effort. The truth is a very different story.

Did you know that there are no designated funds for our Amber Alert system? There are no monies at the local, state or federal level to help offset the costs associated with administering this important effort. Each year in the thirteen-county Houston-Galveston region, populated by more than 5 million people, *12,000 – 15,000 children* are reported missing, and Texas Center for the Missing is responsible for all costs associated with administering the Amber Alert in our high-need region.

## LEGISLATION AND OTHER PUBLIC POLICY ISSUES TO PURSUE

- Comprehensive Funding Tied to Collaborative Efforts
- Establish Statewide Minimum Standards for Certification for Search and Rescue Volunteers
- Give parole officers the right to enter sex offenders residences so law enforcement officers do not have to wait hours for warrants when looking for an abducted child

## CONCLUSION

Regardless of the circumstances under which a child is missing or homeless – abduction, runaway or throwaway – each of those children, dulled by that trauma, represents a bright future – our future. However, we must devote resources to helping them regain the innocence and sense of hope that will inspire them to become an active, caring part of the communities in which we live. Otherwise, we have condemned them and ourselves to less—less quality of life, less security, less of a safety-net for those closest to us.

When I was a child, I dreamed of having a child, loving and nurturing a young life. When I realize that dream and had my two daughters, I poured my heart and soul and most of my energy into protecting them and raising them. They were my number one priority, as they should be.

Too often children are not the number one priority of their parents, or of the communities and society in which they are reared. Lip-service is paid to them in grand speeches and editorials, and through poorly funded programs that address piece-meal programs instead of servicing the spectrum of comprehensive needs.

Ultimately, we are judged not on what we say but what we do, and children learn from us too -- not from listening to what we say but by watching and emulating what we do, and recognizing where they fall in our priorities. I believed while raising my young children that the world was, at least generally, a safe place. I wonder what young mothers think now.

Unfortunately, adults no longer represent figures of authority to our children, those to whom respect is due. Adults are seen as threats to, or targets of, children. However, we must not blame the child. The child learns by example, by our actions not our proselytizing.

We can blame the media, the celebrities, and law enforcement, but we are the ones who must bear the brunt of the blame – parents, grandparents, citizens of the communities in which our children grow up, decision-makers and policy-makers. We must ask ourselves each day “*Am I putting the welfare of our children first?*”

*We are fortunate in the Houston area to have a comprehensive network of organizations that mobilize and deploy resources to help save children. Most areas don't. However, would it not be better to eliminate the problem of missing children by putting child predators on notice that we won't tolerate them targeting our children, and if they do, we will hunt them down like the animals they are?*

Predators like Joseph Smith, who murdered Carlie Brucia in Florida in 2004 and will never be released from prison, will never victimize another child, but those like him are legion. Our best

defense against his type are more, and better-funded, programs like the ones AMECO Organizations offer to parents and children in how to reduce the ways for them to become victims.

Each time a child has been abducted – my heart is crushed, and I want to rewind the clock to see what could have been done differently to prevent the tragedy. But all I can do is help when I can and stay steadfast in my convictions that we *can* reduce these incidences. Working in the missing child field has changed my life forever. I am convinced there is no more challenging or rewarding work, nor has my contribution to any field been more important. Together we can save lives and childhood's innocence.

*For the victim and family involved in an abduction or Internet luring case – the victimization is a “life sentence”. Their lives are normal the day before the incident, but during and after it there lives will never be the same again.*

*Beth Alberts  
Texas Center for the Missing*