

AN AMBER ALERT TRAINING & TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE
PROGRAM PUBLICATION



AMBER Alert Best Practices for Public Information Officers (PIOs)

- 2020 EDITION -



A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

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Introduction

When a child is endangered, missing, or abducted, the Public Information Officer (PIO) fills an essential role in law enforcement's effective communications with the public, navigating critically important interactions with broadcast and online media providers. The overarching goal of the PIO is to promote swift and thorough sharing of information throughout the life cycles of these critical incidents while protecting the integrity of associated enforcement and investigative work in the cases as they evolve.

The interdependency with broadcast and online media providers is complex. Law enforcement relies significantly on media outlets to work in sequence with them, not trying to push or get ahead of the current facts in the case, in order to reach the public with clear, accurate, and timely information about the child and other case circumstances. Similarly, the media relies on law enforcement's forthrightness and transparency in order to do their part in the case well – and that means law enforcement regularly sharing everything they can, as rapidly as they can, to help keep the case front-of-mind with the public.

When the importance of this coordination between law enforcement and the media is recognized, collaboratively strategized, and established in solid policies, procedures, and operational agreements, the result is faster and stronger public alerting, and ongoing, targeted awareness of the latest developments in the case. This creates an engaged, cooperative force multiplier in law enforcement's work to safely recover the missing child; the public network of 'eyes and ears' on the lookout for the child is energized and informed, resulting in a better yield of tips and leads that can assist an investigation where outcome probabilities are measured not in days, nor hours, but minutes.

Over the last two decades, a robust network has evolved to support the rapid and coordinated response to endangered missing and abducted children. Strong commitment and earnest collaboration between federal, state and local law enforcement agencies, broadcast media, and other web-based media providers (news outlets, social media, and private sector partners such as lottery and transportation associations) has vastly improved the nation's response to these critical incidents. Law enforcement agencies across the country are increasingly recognizing the need for a dynamic and strategic communication plan aligned with critical incident management principles that can be swiftly executed when a child goes missing. An established PIO role within the critical incident model ensures operations are implemented without delay or confusion, and that the media is engaged as early as possible to establish a solid foundation for the release of information and updates as the case unfolds.

History: AMBER Alerts and the Growth of a Nationwide Network

The AMBER Alert Program began in the Dallas-Fort Worth region after a young girl was abducted and brutally murdered in Arlington, Texas. On that fateful day of January 13, 1996, nine-year-old Amber Hagerman, along with her five-year-old brother Ricky and mother Donna, were visiting relatives. Amber and Ricky were outside riding bicycles and ended up near an abandoned grocery store approximately two blocks from their grandparent's home. Within a few minutes after Ricky returned to the house, Amber was missing.



Amber Hagerman

A neighbor who lived near the grocery store dialed 9-1-1 to report witnessing the kidnapping of Amber from the parking lot. The search for Amber resulted in finding her deceased in a nearby creek, less than five miles from the initial crime scene.

In the wake of Amber's abduction and murder, the resolve to create a rapid and effective response to reports of abducted children was born through local police department officials' commitment to developing a partnership with Dallas-Fort Worth broadcasters. Together, they established a coordinated system to quickly disseminate crucial information to the public in the event of a confirmed kidnapping. The idea was simple, yet would have the most positive and profound implications for safely recovering endangered missing and abducted children.

Decades later, the America's Missing Broadcast Emergency Response (AMBER) Alert is utilized through state and regional programs in all 50 states and has resulted in the [successful recovery of 1,000 children](#) as of July 2020. Although Amber Hagerman's criminal case remains unsolved, despite hundreds of leads over the 20 years since her disappearance, her death was not in vain. To learn more about the power of AMBER Alerts, visit www.missingkids.com/gethelpnow/amber.

Through popular culture, mass media, and public outreach efforts, AMBER Alerts have become nationally recognized as an essential tool in the overall scope of emergency public notifications. Through advances in technology, AMBER Alerts have evolved from being broadcast solely via television and radio broadcast systems, to utilizing a broad array of electronic messaging tools such as wireless alerts over cellular and other mobile Wi-Fi devices, highway/roadway signs, and lottery and other point of sale terminals. Technologies have expanded year after year to more broadly and rapidly disseminate alerts. With more than 96% of Americans now owning a cellular device, law enforcement and their media partners have a stronger-than-ever opportunity to reach and enlist the help of the public¹.

The AMBER Alert Program works because citizens know what to look for, who to contact and what is at stake; and delivering this key information to them is the work of law enforcement and media, working together, and striving to continuously improve. Learn more about the history of the U.S. Department of Justice's AMBER Alert initiative, and the powerful, grass-roots progression of state and regional AMBER Alert programs, by visiting the [AMBER Advocate website's About AMBER Alert page](#).

When AMBER Alerts Occur: The Essential PIO Role

The PIO has one of the most fundamental roles in an active AMBER Alert - to ensure timely and consistent information is released to the media and public on behalf of the law enforcement agency (or agencies) handling the investigation. This information will be disseminated in a variety of ways including formal press releases, digital posts on appropriate law enforcement websites and all social media platforms officially used by the agency, and active updates through PIO messaging systems. While law enforcement chief executives and supervisors are tasked with managing the investigation itself, inquiries from the public and the media should uniformly be directed to the PIO.

Critical PIO Functions within the AMBER Alert Program:

- Informs the public of approved, releasable information via traditional media, social media platforms, law enforcement website(s), automated phone notifications, and electronic signage.
- Stages an appropriate media briefing location that offers the media the space they need to park large, live-feed trucks, and other equipment. This location should be carefully chosen to prevent the media

¹ Pew Research Center, Internet & Technology, 2019, Mobile Fact Sheet, retrieved September 8, 2020, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/mobile/>

from being too close to an active investigation, yet will allow them to receive briefings regularly and have access to at least some visuals from the command post area. If this is not an option, the PIO may take video or still photos to provide the press sufficient and regular/ongoing coverage.

- Maintains structured control of media messaging through consistent, updated press briefings or alerts containing photographs, video, social media screenshots, and other relevant materials to assist the media in getting a complete message out to the public about the missing child incident.
- Continually reviews the following content to ensure possible tips and leads are provided to the investigative team: posts, shares, and messages on all of the agency's social media pages; local media websites and their social media pages; and emails to an official email address (often created by the PIO office) used by the public specifically for tips, leads, and/or updates on a missing child incident.
- Informs the public of volunteer opportunities in the event they are being used, including specific information and instructions on how to assist.
- Works closely with incident supervisors and victim advocates to offer aid to the family on how to properly respond to the media when they are approached in person, by phone, and online.
- Ensures the law enforcement agency's chief executive or his/her designee provides on-camera updates to the press, the frequency of which is determined by event duration and scope. The media should be asked to continue to provide the public with regular, concise updates as the investigation unfolds. This supports consistent coverage all on media platforms and greater public attention and awareness to assist with tips in the case.
- Prepares to handle the final press briefings (in both the best- and worst-case outcomes), understanding dynamics will be fluid and subject to change significantly throughout the investigation. Training through mock-incident scenarios and after-action debriefing events will inform this critically important preparedness.
- Maintains awareness of false information spreading online by the public or through the media, and works to correct these on behalf of the law enforcement agency.
- Leads an after-action briefing on the media response with all staff who assisted, discussing topics specific to each person's area of operations. The effectiveness of processes used should be evaluated, as well as the overall public messaging strategy and the responses it produced, to assess how things can be improved in the future.

Establishing PIO Roles and Responsibilities Through Policy and Procedure

No law enforcement agency should be without a PIO during this critical time of need for public and media assistance. The PIO will be the first to begin releasing information on the incident and will continue to ensure proper messaging throughout the investigation and even long after its conclusion. The PIO must be comfortable on camera and capable of properly preparing both the investigators and the family members of the missing child for the likelihood of also being on camera.

During an ongoing criminal investigation, the media and the public will want new information as it is permitted for release. The PIO will also continue to play a role after the AMBER Alert had been deactivated. The PIO should be prepared for long-term media interest in the case if the child remains missing or is recovered deceased. If an arrest in the case has been made, the PIO will also assist with facilitating press briefings and updates on the suspect, as well as potentially working with the victim's family if they are approached by the media about that development.

The department's chief executive officer (CEO) must have confidence in the PIO and understand the importance of this role. The PIO must be willing to work with the entire missing child investigative team and be aware of everyone's role and what each is doing throughout the activation; this is critical in formulating the best messaging. An AMBER Alert does not allow the luxury of time to determine a line of authority in the midst of an incident. Thus, this line should be proactively established through policy and procedure by the law enforcement agency's missing child response team. Having a planned system that defines roles, responsibilities, and reporting procedures is essential to the effective functioning of the PIO. In the context of a critical incident involving an endangered missing or abducted child, the PIO should be at the forefront of the activation.

The PIO should be notified immediately upon intake of the endangered missing or abducted child report and where applicable, should be involved in the AMBER Alert process, even before the decision to activate has been made. Not doing so places the PIO at an immediate disadvantage and allows for the media to run stories that are inaccurate or incomplete at best. Further, the vacuum that delayed PIO involvement/coordination creates promotes social media 'buzz' within the community where the child went missing, and which can rapidly spread far beyond that community.

The PIO's responsibilities must be clearly defined by the law enforcement agency, and the PIO should be well-versed in procedures for an AMBER Alert. The PIO must know when and how to notify the media and public that an AMBER Alert has been issued. The PIO must also be ready to clearly explain how and why cases are evaluated for the use of the alert to help the media and public understand that decision in the case. The PIO must be adept at handling both broadcast and social media inquiries, and how to redirect and correct inaccurate information if it begins to spread through both traditional and online media. The PIO must be continuously equipped with the correct information on where to direct the public for leads, tips, and other information regarding the AMBER Alert.

The effectiveness of the law enforcement agency's public information operations is enhanced through strong leadership and clear direction rooted in well-constructed, easily accessible, and regularly updated policy and procedures. This includes interagency agreements, such as Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) and similar operating agreements. These agreements establish roles, responsibilities, lines of accountability, and sequencing for triaging and updating key information to support the safe recovery of the endangered missing or abducted child.

For any law enforcement agency, a PIO job description should be available, even if it is not a position the agency currently has in its organizational structure.



Duties and Responsibilities:

Public Information Officers (PIO) gather facts from law enforcement's work on incidents and cases and distribute them to the media. They are also responsible for producing print, video, and online content about the organization. The PIO disseminates that material to the public in a coordinated and appropriate manner. The PIO organizes special events, media conferences, and oversees official social media accounts for the department.

- Maintains knowledge of the objectives, policies, regulations, general orders or needs of the agency to develop public relations strategies that will influence public opinion or promote ideas or services; plans or directs development or communication of programs to maintain accurate public perceptions around agency accomplishments, programs, and areas of responsibility.
- Develops plans or materials to communicate activities undertaken by the agency that are beneficial to the public safety or other important social issues; arranges public appearances, lectures, or exhibits for the public to increase awareness of services and to promote cooperation and positive community relations.
- Establishes and/or maintains cooperative relationships with representatives of the community, consumers, the media, employees, and public interest groups.
- Develops informative, engaging, and effective press releases and similar media communications and prepares information for media kits; prepares or edits agency communications (e.g., employee newsletters, annual reports, PSAs, videos, brochures) for internal and external audiences.
- Updates and maintains content posted on the agency intranet, as well as websites/pages and social media pages.

Knowledge, Skills & Abilities

- Extensive knowledge of the principles and practices of media production, communications, and dissemination techniques and methods including alternative ways to inform the public via written, verbal, and visual media.
- Skill in talking to others to convey information effectively.
- Ability to remain current with emerging technology in the public relations and criminology fields and to establish objectives and strategies, identify required resources, and develop plans to carry out work in alignment with each.
- Ability to work long hours under high-stress situations, including reviewing case records on homicides, child abuse/neglect cases, sexual assault, and other major crime incidents.
- Ability to be in an on-call status, available 24 hours a day.
- Ability to use various social media platforms and manage/coordinate official agency communications and monitor trends.

The PIO's Role Within the Incident Command System (ICS)

Through the evolution of AMBER Alert programs across the nation, the role of law enforcement's Public Information Officer has become more clearly recognized as the communication cornerstone when endangered missing and abducted child incidents occur. AMBER Alert systems work best when all component agencies and organizations function in a coordinated and consistent manner.

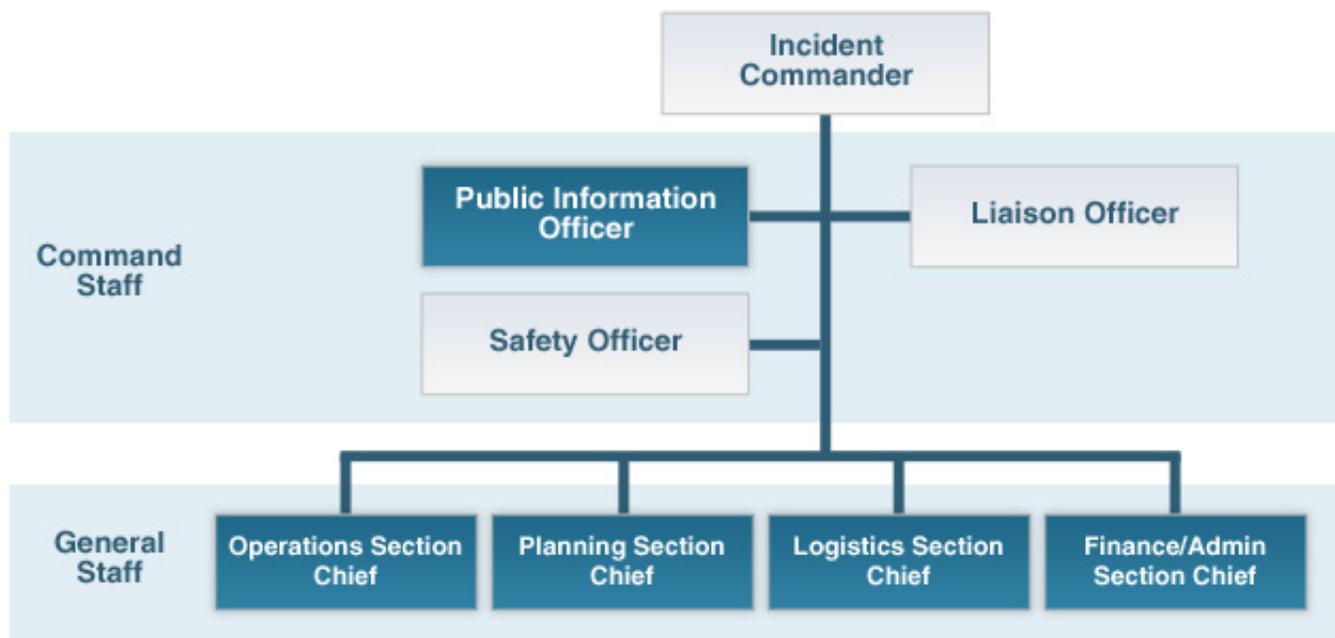


Chart 1 - <https://managementhelp.org/blogs/crisis-management/2017/03/28/incident-command-system/>

The Incident Command System (ICS) defines what first responders and other law enforcement agencies will do during and after a major incident, and as such, plays a vital role during an AMBER Alert activation. When responding to an endangered missing or abducted child, police command and public information officers (PIO) should expect intense media pressure and public scrutiny during these emotional events in which the public has a strong desire to help. Similarly, law enforcement must recognize the need for wide-scale assistance from other agencies and multi-jurisdictional supports such as Child Abduction Response Teams (CART) when these events occur, and take proactive steps to build the request and deployment of these resources into operating procedures within the ICS.

Departments should have a policy on file governing critical incident investigations and the ICS. Model policies are available from organizations that provide ICS training. It is advised that PIOs practice simulated abductions to match policy expectations, revising and refining them based on lessons learned from these and actual incidents through the agency's after-action debrief and continuous improvement processes.

The immediate demand for public information can be enormous during the first few hours of an endangered missing or abducted child incident. The ICS structure clearly delineates the roles of each responding officer, investigator, PIO, and other personnel to support swift, effective, intelligence gathering and to appropriately direct resources to safely recover the child.

During an endangered missing or abducted child event, the PIO should have direct access to the Incident Commander. This includes access to information and briefings that may assist the PIO with developing messaging to be disseminated to the public to aid in the investigation and recovery of the child. The PIO should determine, along with direction and coordination from the Incident Commander, any limits on information release. Based upon the facts of the case, the PIO should develop accurate information for use in media briefings, social media posts, and news releases.

Release of information should be timely, tracking with the case progression to the greatest degree possible, and approved by the Incident Commander prior to dissemination. There is often a need for multiple media briefings over the life of a case, based on its evolving events and circumstances. If deemed appropriate, the PIO can guide closer media access to evidentiary areas or items to support gathering footage and updates the public can use to better assist in providing tips.

Social media provides many benefits to the PIO during a critical incident; yet also presents many challenges – namely managing the accuracy of the information as tips and leads are generated. Regular review of information once it is posted to social media platforms is critically important, as reposts, shares and subsequent commenting can quickly derail the accuracy of information with which the public is being asked

Model Policy and Procedural Resources:

- NCMEC Model Policy for Missing Child Incidents (and other best practice resources for law enforcement first responders)
- Justice.gov Police Critical Incident Checklist
- COPS Office After Action Review Guide
- COPS Office Strategic Communications Practices
- COPS Office Social Media and Tactical Considerations

Other organizations such as the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) and the Major City Chiefs Association (MCCA) also offer model policy and tactical guides; please consult with your agency regarding membership and access to those additional law enforcement resources.

to assist. Incoming tips and leads should be collected and managed through a central repository, and it is often advisable to activate trained departmental personnel to assist the PIO in social media reviews.

Traditional broadcast media must be closely monitored to ensure local television and radio outlets are reporting accurate information. Departmental personnel should be assigned to watch television coverage, listen to local radio, and read online news stories.

Incident Management from a Communications Perspective

The PIO fulfills a unique and important ICS role during an endangered missing or abducted child incident. Regardless of how the notification comes in, a timely response to the scene by the PIO is critical. Upon arrival, communications personnel should seek out the Incident Commander or ranking supervisor on scene to be briefed on operations and to establish PIO communications and related procedures going forward.

In some jurisdictions, it may take considerable time to assemble a team of detectives and other investigative personnel to establish investigative response and coordination. Time is of the essence, and as such, the PIO's priority should be obtaining the basic facts surrounding the incident. It is common for a PIO's cell phone and email to become inundated with reporters and news desk personnel attempting to inquire about what is going on, especially if an agency's radio communications are accessible by the general public.

PIO AMBER Alert Checklist

A well-trained PIO will remain calm and work in a logical sequence to obtain the primary facts needed to develop an initial briefing for the media. This list, while not exhaustive, provides basic elements to be included on a PIO checklist.

- Date, time, and location of the incident
- What happened and nature of the child's disappearance
- Whether there are facts to confirm an abduction has occurred
- Reasons why the family and law enforcement believe the child is immediate danger
- Child identifying information such as name, gender, age, clothing description, and other features that may aid in recovery
- Recent photograph(s) and/or videos of the child to be shared, when appropriate, through social media, television broadcasts, and other media releases
- Suspect identifying information
- Suspect vehicle information, (if applicable)
- Any relevant facts that may be released in coordination with the investigative team which do not hinder the criminal investigation, and can aid in the recovery of the child

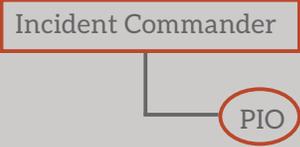
Once the basic facts are obtained, the PIO should prepare messaging for review by the Incident Commander and investigative supervisor. A formal statement that can be released quickly will strengthen an agency's ability to safely recover the child. While this messaging is being prepared and vetted, the PIO should also be working through the agency protocols to prepare information for an AMBER Alert activation request in the event an AMBER Alert is issued.

Within states and even jurisdictions, the criteria, process, and technologies used to request an AMBER Alert broadcast may vary. As the AMBER Alert activation is confirmed, the PIO should ensure a basic news release indicating its issuance is quickly distributed, along with any pertinent updates related to the decision to activate the alert.



ICS: A PIO's Phased Response Resource

The following chart can be used to understand the work of the PIO across the four phases of an AMBER Alert. This should serve as a guide for assessing your agency's readiness, through its ICS protocols, for effective work by and with the PIO. Information should be modified in accordance with applicable policy and procedure, and local and state statutes.

ICS	AMBER Alert Phases	Assignments
 <p>The diagram shows a box labeled 'Incident Commander' with a line connecting it to a circle labeled 'PIO'.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Initial Response Phase 2. Dissemination of Information Phase 3. Investigation Phase 4. Recovery & Demobilization Phase 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lead PIO 2. Information Gathering (assist PIO) 3. Media Staging (manage media) 4. Operations Support (assist PIO)

PUBLIC INFORMATION NEEDS DURING AN AMBER ALERT	
<p>1. TIMELY AND ACCURATE FACTS What happened? Who is the child? What is being done? Who is the suspect? What information can be released to help locate the child? How can the public help?</p>	<p>2. MAGNITUDE How big is the search area? Is a vehicle involved? How is the agency broadening awareness throughout the region?</p>
<p>3. IMMEDIACY What can we share right now?</p>	<p>4. DURATION How quickly can we disseminate initial facts and keep the public notified of updates?</p>
<p>5. MANAGEMENT OF THE EMERGENCY Who is in charge? Where should tips go? How is the investigation progressing?</p>	<p>6. EMERGENCY MITIGATED/DEMOBILIZATION How did we recover the child? What happened to suspect?</p>
<p>Early in the incident, the immediate release of basic identifying information with the goal of recovering the child should be released through social media, news releases, and media briefings. The activation of the formal AMBER Alert process in your region/state should be initiated quickly once the activation criteria have been verified. Updated facts should be released as they are confirmed.</p>	

INITIAL RESPONSE PHASE (Immediate Operational Period)

<input type="checkbox"/>	9-1-1 call of reported abduction/endangered missing child.
<input type="checkbox"/>	PIO emergency “go kit” containing pads of paper, computer, portable radio, cell phone charger, etc.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Respond to scene (formal command post should already be set up).
<input type="checkbox"/>	Meet with Incident Commander (IC) and designate other staff to assist in PIO assignments.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Media staging area: Set up proper placement and notify dispatch/media.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Obtain situational report and basic facts surrounding missing child incident.
<input type="checkbox"/>	IC will advise if there are any limits on information release.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Verify/confirm information for the information dissemination phase.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Assess gravity of incident (do we need to establish a Joint Information Center/Command (JIC)? Additional resources? Peer agency support?)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Draft message(s) and release(s) and obtain approval by IC and investigative supervisor.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Lead PIO makes notification to city, county, state, or federal PIO(s) to ensure completeness and accuracy of information to support broad law enforcement awareness (and consistency of information across jurisdictions if/as applicable).

DISSEMINATION OF INFORMATION PHASE

<input type="checkbox"/>	Implement the communications strategy appropriate to the incident/situation. (Coordinate with IC and investigative supervisor. Are there any information constraints?)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Basic facts should be released as soon as possible (in the absence of information media will start interviewing anyone they believe may have it).
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Develop accurate, accessible, and timely information for use in press conference/media briefings on scene:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Timeline (initial call) • What happened? • Identify key messages as needed: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identifying factors of missing child. 2. Commitment to quick resolution of incident, recovering child safely, and restoring order to the community. 3. Suspect clues and tips to aid in recovery. • Basic information about incident. What are investigators doing? Last known location? Search radius? How can public help? Website? Tip hotline? • Have someone film the briefing to upload to social media, or use a live stream method. • Disseminate recent photograph of child and any surveillance of suspect or suspect vehicle. • Answer questions and announce next briefing time.

DISSEMINATION OF INFORMATION PHASE (continued)

<input type="checkbox"/>	Obtain IC and investigative supervisor approval on formal news release publishing.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Prior to press conference or interviews, talk through the information release and anticipate questions.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Press conference: Who will speak?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Record interviews/press conferences.

INVESTIGATION PHASE

<input type="checkbox"/>	Continue to attend Situational Report (SITREP) investigative meetings to obtain additional information and confirm facts.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Make appropriate notifications to the school PIO if applicable.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Rotate PIO personnel as needed and watch for signs of fatigue.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Assign someone to review traditional media.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Assign someone to review social media.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Consider setting up a standalone webpage as a single source for all information to which the public and media can be referred.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Push relevant and important updates through social media first, versus a formal press briefing. Follow up with a press briefing when time permits.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Consider long-term parking, providing food/drink to reporters, and protecting neighborhood stability and safety.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Protect the family if possible and shield them from unwanted media attention. NOTE: Establish the family resource officer and/or family advocate role in the critical incident management plan; train and ready personnel to be deployed in one or both roles as early in the case as possible. This optimizes support of the family and minimizes harm done through intense media and public scrutiny.

RECOVERY & DEMOBILIZATION PHASE

<input type="checkbox"/>	Recovered child: If found safe, highlight success on social media and prepare for large scale press conference announcing the findings and what happened.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Recovered child: If found injured/deceased, carefully coordinate the information only after family notifications have been made. Focus on work to bring suspect(s) to justice.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Prepare final news release and confirm approval to publish/disseminate as needed.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Debrief personnel and allow for constructive critique of operation.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Conduct an after-action review of the PIO/media operations during the incident and finalize after-action reports.



Communications Strategy: Key Considerations and Tools

The following charts can be used to conceptualize a strategy for effective PIO communications with the media and prepare for effective interviews and press briefings.

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY TEMPLATE

- Who, what, when, where, why, and how?
- Speed of the response.
- Who is involved?
- Resources that have been brought to the scene.
- Status of the emergency incident.
- Advice to the public and help needed/how to help.
- Safety of the community and focus on recovery of the child.
- Protection and preservation of the investigation.

IMPORTANT ELEMENTS FOR PRESS/BRIEFING STATEMENTS

- I want to share with you information pertaining to this missing child investigation.
- My goal is to keep you informed with the latest established information regarding this incident.
- As a resident of this community..... As a member of this department....
- I know that you are interested in..... and we pledge to do everything we can to keep you informed.
- Our hearts are with the family of.... The safe return of NAME of CHILD is our priority.
- If the suspect is listening to this message, please do the right thing... Return NAME.... Drop her/him off at....
- We all are interested in the health and safety of NAME of CHILD.
- Looking at this situation from the parent's perspective, I also feel....
- I live nearby as well, and I am interested in....
- We have been in contact with (the incident commander, FBI, etc.) attempting to get the most up-to-date information about what happened and seek their assistance.
- As a resident of this community, I am interested in the safety and well-being of our families, our neighbors, and our children.
- I am here to share with you the knowledge and confidence I have in our ability to protect the citizens and our community and know that the first few hours of an incident are critical.
- We need the public's help.... You are our extra eyes and ears.... If you see something out of the ordinary, no matter how miniscule it may seem, please reach out and provide us that information.
- Our tip line is.... Our webpage has critical information...
- I agree that.... is important.
- If I were in your shoes and reading/hearing/seeing the things you have, I would be asking the same questions.
- If it is an important question to you, then it is an important question to me.
- The issue(s) you have raised is/are at the top of my list of priorities.
- I also care about.... My priority is I have asked myself the very same question.
- In listening to your question, I can sense your frustration about

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS FROM THE MEDIA

- Why was the child outside? Where was the family when this happened? Relationship between victim(s) and suspect(s)?
- How large an area is being searched? Where should volunteers go to help? Who is in charge? Are the feds involved?
- What is the suspect profile?
- What should the public be doing right now?
- Are there any sex offenders that live in the area?
- Data suggests that the longer that a child is missing, reaching a positive conclusion diminishes. What do you say about that?
- How is the family? How are they holding up? Are they willing to be interviewed?
- When is the last time this community experienced an abduction?
- Is there any surveillance footage that investigators have uncovered?
- Are there any witnesses to the incident?

TIPS FOR WORKING WITH THE MEDIA AND ANSWERING QUESTIONS

- Use the interview as an opportunity to deliver a key message.
- Use a question as an opportunity to weave in what you want the public to know.
- Be aware of what the reporters already know and anticipate what information they will need.
- Prepare by developing responses to potential questions.
- Make sure the reporter gets your name and title right.
- Do not ask to review the article or broadcast before it is published or aired.
- Relax. Try to develop a rapport with the reporters and make the time worthwhile.
- Answer questions in a conversational tone and at your own pace. Assume that the microphones are always on.
- Be concise and brief as possible, making your point first. Speak from the public's point of view.
- Never say "No comment." If you cannot answer the question for a particular reason, say so.
- Pay attention to your use of arcane jargon or lingo, as well as statistics or acronyms.
- Do not speak disparagingly of anyone, assign blame, or "pass the buck," no matter how a reporter frames the question.
- Do not answer a hypothetical question. Avoid speculating by rephrasing the question. Do not give personal opinion.



MEDIA INTERVIEW PREPARATION

<p>Introduce Yourself, Define Time Frames, and Establish Ground Rules</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good morning/afternoon/evening...My name is ____ (spell name) and I am the _____ (title) for the _____ (department). Please hold your questions until after the briefing. Background information is available _____ (confirm location/position in the briefing area where materials can be obtained). Please place your phone and other devices in silent mode. I have ___ minutes available for this briefing. Let me tell you what information has been confirmed, and then I will take a few questions. • If available, have your business card and a media interview summary sheet available at the briefing location so reporters can obtain them without having to ask you/staff.
<p>Opening Statement (Use visual aids as appropriate throughout.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain eye contact with each reporter for 5-7 seconds rather than scanning quickly across the press group/gallery. • If doing a one on one interview, stay connected through good eye contact with the reporter as you listen and respond to questions. • Stay on topic with your talking points. These should include things like the time police were notified of incident, general incident details, and other elemental information they can use to develop their segments. • If you are interrupted say: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Please hold your questions. My statement should answer most of them. My goal is to provide you with the information I have, and to answer your questions following that.
<p>Summary/Closing Statement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let me summarize with these three key points for your listeners, viewers, and readers: • Enumerate clearly your three key points in summarizing the briefing information.
<p>Reiterate Q/A Process to Open Q/A</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have about ___ minutes left for ___ more questions.
<p>Countdown the Last Two Questions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have time for just two more questions (and then...) • I have time for one final question.
<p>Close the Session Professionally</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thank the individual(s) for their time and attention and let them know when you expect the next briefing to be held, if appropriate. • Reiterate where questions, tips/leads and any follow up communications should be directed. • An example might be, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I need to leave now, so I can update the situation. The next media briefing will be scheduled at _____ (time/place). In the meantime, (my assistant) _____ (title, name) will remain here to log any additional questions or special interview requests you have. With those, please be sure to specify any deadlines you are facing, or any other needs you may have. Thank you very much. • Remember cameras and mics are likely still on even as you end the event.

Media Briefings

Communications professionals should ensure they have identified a suitable location for media to stage and provide in-person briefings. Typically, media personnel may pursue and attempt to interview residents and neighbors absent any official statements made by law enforcement, which can create misinformation, confusion, and unneeded stress or harm for the victim and family.

In selecting a location, consider appropriate backdrops, live feeds, truck antennas, and proximity to the incident. Once a location has been determined, set the time and notify the media. Social media may be used to send out press conference briefing schedules. Prepare media briefing sheets (and previous media releases) for reporters. Do not approach the press gathering area until the official start time. Upon arrival, begin the conference promptly (even if some camera crews are not ready). Remember, live microphones could be broadcasting as soon as the PIO enters the conference area.

Suitable locations can include areas that are not prohibited by private property rules and which afford adequate space to set up camera, microphone, and lighting equipment. If large crowds develop and more privacy is needed during the media briefing, the PIO can bring news media staff to an off-site location. In addition, a safety officer can be assigned to monitor the briefing location. Consideration for accommodating live footage/feed trucks should be maintained throughout the process.

During the initial press conference, the PIO is well-positioned to relay important foundational facts which can allow the media to obtain audio and visual footage directly from a credible law enforcement representative; this supports more accurate and sound reporting from the outset of the case and as it continues. It is important to answer questions immediately following the official statement whenever possible. If the PIO knows the next regularly scheduled briefing time, that information should be provided to the media.

Best practices include having another department employee film and live stream the press briefing. In the event bandwidth is not adequate to live stream an event, the footage can be quickly formatted for posting on the department's official social media page(s).

As the incident evolves, consideration should be given to having the agency CEO speak during a press event. This may be done upon recovery of the child and should be carefully planned based on case outcomes. A preparation session with the agency CEO to review information and practice what will be said is important in supporting his/her effective communications and demeanor with the media. Often, department heads will

speak during key/pivotal times in the case, such as when the child is recovered safe; or when a tragedy occurs with an unfavorable outcome with the child.

In some circumstances, multiple jurisdictions may be involved in working the case. The primary investigative agency should lead the press briefings. If multiple and/or multi-jurisdictional representatives are included in the process, care should be given to not overly extend the briefing with too much information from varying sources, as this can lead to inadvertent conflicting statements, and/or misquoting by members of the media about who said what.

Social Media Reviews

The scope and influence of social media presents both challenges and opportunities for law enforcement when working critical incidents and rapidly evolving cases. PIOs can quickly disseminate information to broad audiences about investigations, but conversely face significant and ever-evolving challenges in keeping up with incoming comments, messages, and posts when social media and other interactive platforms are used to disseminate public alerting information. To effectively review and manage this influx of information, specific employees should be assigned, working under the guidance of the PIO. The public is increasingly using social media platforms to communicate with law enforcement on tips, information, and questions. The use of a call-in tip line, while still vitally important, cannot be solely relied upon to gather information to produce leads in the case. It is critically important that all channels, both phone and web-based, be dynamically reviewed throughout the life cycle of the case to ensure information is not missed.



For traditional media reviews, there are several commercial platforms available to ensure coverage is not missed. Some charge a fee and allow agencies to set up certain key words that will notify the agency when a story matching those key words runs. There are also free services such as Google Alerts and Tweet Deck that allow similar functionality.

Television news, print media, and radio should be continuously reviewed for messaging accuracy. In addition, some citizens may give interviews and provide relevant information to media personnel that investigators may not be aware of and that could aid in the investigation.

Information Requests: Meeting the Need and Managing the Intensity

When a child is abducted, the lead investigating agency can expect to receive intense public interest and scrutiny in the case. The news media will have a desire to receive consistent updates throughout the investigation. This will include requests for relevant video, photos, and access to the child's family and friends.

A good rule of thumb is not to schedule the next media briefing just for the sake of holding it. If there is no new information to report, it can make for an unprofessional event which can drive uncertainty and frustration. This will not help the investigation, nor the ongoing relations with media contacts.

When approaching the cameras before a briefing, PIOs should assume the coverage may already be live, especially on social media. With this presumption, "hot mics" should not preoccupy the concern of the PIO. With an 'always on, always professional' assumption, the PIO can focus on delivering information and addressing relevant questions to promote awareness and effective assistance in the case.

Begin the briefing promptly and clearly convey the facts. Allow media members to ask questions. In the event an answer is not known, indicate to the reporter you will get back to them. Have a secondary employee take notes related to all relevant unanswered questions so they can be researched following the briefing, with responses provided either at the next briefing or through other communications channels established with those media contacts.

In situations where a reporter asks a question that cannot be answered due to confidentiality or 'guilty knowledge' information, simply indicate to the reporter that out of an abundance of caution to protect the integrity of the investigation, the information cannot be released at this time.

What the Media Wants and What the PIO Should Deliver

An effective PIO is trained and becomes more adept over time at anticipating what the media will want in an endangered missing or abducted child investigation, and prepares in ways which position the PIO team to address the media in a timely and complete manner. The willingness to do this is founded in the PIO's understanding of the interdependent relationship law enforcement has with the media when these incidents occur. When minutes matter, every step that can be taken to lessen or mitigate 'adversarial' stances or interactions with the media matters also – as swift and accurate reporting positions law enforcement and the public to cooperate toward faster location and recovery of the child. The media wants:

- **Consistent updates, photos and videos, and access to the crime scene.** Since the media cannot access the scene, the PIO may obtain appropriate video of investigators working the scene to provide to them.
- **Compelling sound and/or audio clips from law enforcement's briefings.** It is up to the PIO to construct relevant briefing events, even when there is no real 'new information' to provide. An example might be having an expert in child psychology or a related field speak to the media to provide a greater understanding on a specific element of the case.
- **More information.** The more information the PIO can provide the media, the more they will keep the message alive with the public. Highlighting appropriate elements of the investigative process can be helpful, providing media with an idea of what investigators are doing to locate the child.
- **Quality social media content.** Short videos, short interviews that are not part of the media briefings, and unique content, such as access to people volunteering in the search for the child, and/or any vigils that are being held in the child's honor; all are important to the media.
- **Access to the family.** In general, this is not advocated by law enforcement, as history has shown media is an intrusive force upon the family at a highly vulnerable, painful and uncertain time; and more often than not causes the family harm if not very carefully managed with and by qualified Family Resource Officers and/or Victim and Family Advocates. While there are indeed key times or junctures in a case where an interview of one or more family members can help to capture public attention and support stronger awareness, these must be assessed specific to each individual case, and be closely managed by the investigating agency and trained professionals assisting the family.
- **Suspect Information.** Information about and/or access to images, video footage and/or interviews with the perpetrator if there is an arrest made in the case. If approved by the arrestee and his/

her attorney, such contact should be rigorously coordinated by the PIO to protect the integrity of the ongoing investigation and prosecutorial processes. Generally, the PIO will be present for this interview and will ensure it is recorded.

The PIO's Role in Handling Misinformation and Rumor

One of the most important roles the PIO has during an AMBER Alert activation is controlling the message. False information will come out, and local citizens will post their thoughts on the case online. Occasionally, the media will entertain these rumors and seek out the individuals for interviews. Even if traditional media outlets do not pursue this information, the social media attention alone can create significant confusion and detract from the accuracy of messaging which is critically important in promoting the public's assistance.

As discussed earlier, having an assigned staff member, or team of staff, continuously reviewing social media 24/7 is imperative. This monitoring and information management includes not only reviewing those erroneous posts which begin to pick up steam when a case is prolonged, but also monitoring whether local media is maintaining accurate information on their social media platforms and websites as well. Using resources such as a social media mapping tool to identify what people are saying (and on what platforms) can be extremely helpful. Consider evaluating geography-based information monitoring and aggregation tools, when developing your agency's resources for these critical incidents.

If false information is discovered, it must be dealt with immediately by the PIO and/or assigned team members. As the PIO is busy handling local and possibly national media, ensuring all information fronts are monitored and managed means preparing for, training on, and being ready to execute an 'all hands on deck' approach.

The PIO should utilize the agency's official social media pages, such as a Twitter feed and Facebook page, to provide updates, along with reminders that only the agency's pages should be consulted to ensure the public is obtaining the latest and most accurate information in the case. The importance of this should be established with the media and the public from the very first press release and emphasized with every briefing held and update published thereafter.

The PIO and his/her team should be prepared for constant phone calls and messages from media and even concerned citizens. Ensuring the official PIO voicemail message (if utilized) is consistently updated with the latest, most accurate information, along with where people should go for updates, to leave tips, etc., is key in keeping the pathways of information flowing properly.

The PIO's Role in the Deactivation Phase

When an AMBER Alert is deactivated in a case, the PIO must be accordingly prepared, based upon where the case stands. Regardless of case outcomes at this juncture, organizing an immediate media briefing and social media updates should be priorities. The PIO must be ready with answers to the most basic questions, such as why the alert was deactivated and where the investigation stands.

The PIO must be prepared to work with the family in the event they choose to speak on camera. It is the PIO's job to make sure they are ready for this process and know what to expect. The PIO must work closely with investigators to ensure the family only shares appropriate information and uses appropriate wording and phrases to protect the integrity of the investigation.

If the child has been found safe, this is an excellent opportunity to highlight the work of the entire incident command team and give the parents a chance to stand beside them. This is the story media professionals ultimately want to show - the successful outcome. The PIO should work with the investigative team and the family to provide this information and vantage point through a single media conference. This prevents extra interviews from being necessary right away, gives the family a moment of relative repose, and allows the incident command team time to process the case.

A worst-case scenario - the child being recovered deceased or even badly injured - will require a much longer process for the PIO and all involved with the case. While the critical incident management elements will begin to wind down, the weight of a high-profile, high-stakes ongoing investigation will define the days and even weeks ahead for the PIO and the investigative team.

Media briefings will continue, but with less frequency. As investigative focus increases, the PIO will work to develop and provide appropriate updates to the media when it is beneficial to the case to do so. Conversely, the media will be focused on obtaining audio and video footage from the child's family; if an arrest has been made, the media will seek out interviews with friends, family, and associates (coworkers, neighbors, etc.) of the suspect as well. The PIO should be prepared to carefully monitor these interviews and ensure all footage is immediately shared with the investigative team.

Conclusion

From the first moments of an endangered missing or abducted child incident, through case closure, the role of the PIO is essential to the effective sharing and management of information with the public through interdependent, cooperative work with the media. Despite agency size and staffing levels, the PIO role is essential, and needs to be established, filled, and readied. Building and maintaining strong relationships with the media before critical incidents occur is key to a robust and effective response by all parties involved when a child is missing; and your agency's support of this PIO role will ensure that work can be done.

While state AMBER Alert programs and even regional and jurisdictional policies regarding law enforcement's response to missing children and similar critical incidents may vary, the foundational role a PIO plays in the overall critical incident management structure remains. Early notifications, swift activation of PIO resources and processes, and agency-wide understanding and support of the PIO in the context of the larger incident response will result in more timely, accurate, and complete information sharing with key media outlets, through key information platforms. This supports better management of quality messaging as the case unfolds and increases the likelihood that law enforcement can swiftly and safely recover endangered missing and abducted children.

