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AMBER ADVOCATE 58



The AMBER Advocate, 2024 Issue 2

'One team, one fight'

The 2024 National AMBER Alert and AMBER Alert in Indian Country Symposium

PLUS:

- Lessons learned from an abducted girl's high-profile rescue in Upstate New York
- AMBER Alert-related news from around the U.S., Indian Country, and the world

[Photos]

The 2024 AMBER Alert & AMBER Alert in Indian Country Symposium in New Orleans.

COVER STORY: MAIN FEATURE

‘One Team, One Fight’

Child protection professionals strengthen knowledge and bonds at the 2024 AMBER Alert & AMBER Alert in Indian Country Symposium in New Orleans.

By Denise Gee Peacock

Hundreds of state and regional AMBER Alert Coordinators, Missing Person Clearinghouse Managers, Tribal law enforcement officers, public alerting/emergency management experts, and federal officials gathered in New Orleans February 27–28 to attend the 2024 National AMBER Alert and AMBER Alert in Indian Country Symposium.

The no-fee training and collaborative learning event, funded through the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, and administered by the AMBER Alert Training and Technical Assistance Program (AATTAP), engaged attendees in discussing developing trends and case studies, sharing best practices, and training with other child protection partners to better respond to endangered missing and abducted child cases.

Held at the historic Hotel Monteleone in New Orleans’ French Quarter, the Symposium featured 26 workshops led by dozens of subject-matter experts as well as three keynote speakers. It also included six regional and Tribal breakout sessions that allowed for in-depth discussions on issues of importance to their states and Tribes.

Amanda Leonard, Coordinator for the Missing Child Center-Hawaii/Department of the Attorney General, flew more than 4,200 miles to attend the Symposium with her colleague, William Oku.

“The survivors and trainers at this event give us the needed reminder of why we serve as AMBER Alert Coordinators,” Leonard said. “It’s an incredible opportunity to excel in our important collective work. One team, one fight!”

AATTAP Administrator Janell Rasmussen welcomed hundreds of participants representing nearly every state in the nation, as well as the program’s Northern Border Initiative partner, Canada.

In crediting the grant support that the AATTAP and its AMBER Alert in Indian Country (AIIC) Initiative receives from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), Rasmussen recognized two OJJDP attendees—current AATTAP Grant Manager Alex Sarrano, and Lou Ann Holland, Grant Manager for the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC), “for their dedication to protecting children, and their passion for the work being done” by those at the Symposium.

Rasmussen praised attendees’ “hard work—work most people could not do—on behalf of missing children. Many of them are home today, but some are not. Let’s remember [Elijah Vue](#) in Wisconsin, [Morgan Nick](#) in Arkansas, [Mikelle Biggs](#) in Arizona, and [Navaeh Kingbird](#) in Minnesota. These children and so many others deserve to be found, to be reunited with their families, and to grow up in a safe environment.”

Training ‘for you, by you’

The AATTAP team develops and delivers training opportunities crafted “for you, by you”—and each Symposium is the standard bearer of that.

“‘For you, by you’ isn’t just a catchphrase—it’s our guiding principle,” said Byron Fassett, AATTAP Deputy Administrator. “Everything on the agenda is the result of our team asking everyone at last year’s Symposium—and everyone who participated in hundreds of our classes since then—‘What do you want to see?’ and ‘What are your needs?’”

Additionally, Symposium-goers had a digital, interactive tool for planning, collaborating, and providing feedback: the event app [Whova](#). The platform let participants review the agenda, plan for sessions they wished to attend, map out class locations, check into sessions, weigh in on discussion topics, connect for lunch or dinner, share photos, and much more. Attendees also could suggest topics and locations for next year’s Symposium.

Guest speaker Brad Russ, Executive Director of the National Criminal Justice Training Center ([NCJTC](#)) of Fox Valley Technical College ([FVTC](#)), said he was proud to see how far training topics and techniques have advanced from what he experienced during his early days in law enforcement in New Hampshire.

Russ’s respected work would ultimately lead the OJJDP to seek his involvement in nationwide training that began more than 30 years ago. During that time, missing child advocate [Patty Wetterling](#) of Minnesota “helped open the eyes and hearts of stoic police officers with her powerful insight into what parents face when their child goes missing,” he recalled.

Russ also commended an early mentor—OJJDP/FVTC instructor and retired Pennsylvania Police Sergeant Gary O’Connor—for advancing traditional training techniques that historically involved staid presentations full of statistics into curriculum and instructional design employing more dynamic approaches, such as engaging participants through robust discussions, knowledge checks, and tabletop exercises. Russ has ensured such effective strategies have carried forward since the NCJTC’s creation in 2009.

Power of family perspectives

Symposium attendees received copies of the newly updated resource, [When Your Child Is Missing: A Family Survival Guide](#). They also learned about its companion website, which gives caregivers and law enforcement instant access to the Guide’s multimedia content, including videos of the parent-survivors sharing powerful stories and advice.

“When we released the Guide on Missing Children’s Day 2023, the families involved in [its production](#) joined us for a meeting with OJJDP Administrator Liz Ryan and her team,” said AATTAP Administrator Rasmussen. “They were adamant that law enforcement needed more guidance on how to best work with, and understand, families of missing children. They also emphasized that missing child cases, and relevant training, should be a priority for law enforcement.”

As a result, Ryan asked the AATTAP to help update the resource guide, [What About Me? Coping With the Abduction of a Brother or Sister](#). “Siblings of missing children often suffer in silence,

but need so much support,” Rasmussen said.

Two family members who are helping produce the new sibling guide served as keynote speakers for the Symposium. [Kimber Biggs](#) spoke about the devastating loss of her 11-year-old sister, [Mikelle Biggs](#). On January 2, 1999, Mikelle was abducted while riding her bike near her family’s Arizona home—and never seen again. Biggs was 9 years old when that trauma took place, but she has spent 25 years advocating on her sister’s behalf. She now works as an Associate for the AATTAP-NCJTC.

Biggs shared several distressing interactions with law enforcement “that I hope you all can learn from.” The biggest blow, she said, was set in motion after detectives learned that her father was having an affair at the time of her sister’s disappearance.

“And instead of looking at other suspects—including a registered sex offender on our street—they fixated on my dad and the affair. That was a huge setback for the case,” Biggs said. “Their thinking that he was guilty of harming my sister only added to our family’s trauma.”

While it’s taken more than two decades to see renewed interest “in what was a very cold case,” a new detective has been assigned to it, Biggs said. “That’s a great relief. It’s nice to have someone now who is trustworthy and proactive. We communicate at least weekly. And the fact that he’s eyeing a significant suspect in the case makes it feel like something is finally happening.”

On the Symposium’s second day, [Pamela Foster](#) shared her powerful story. Foster is the mother of the late 11-year-old [Ashlynn Mike](#), whose May 2016 abduction and murder on the Navajo Nation in New Mexico led to Foster becoming a self-described “warrior mom”—not only for her daughter, but for all children in Indian Country.

“Words cannot describe the brokenness I felt when I learned Ashlynn had been murdered,” Foster said. “Words cannot describe the sheer anguish my family and the community felt at the sudden death of our precious little girl. A deep heartache followed.”

Her anguish would be further heightened after learning that the Navajo Nation—the nation’s largest Indian reservation, spanning three states—was not equipped to quickly issue an AMBER Alert. And confusion by outside law enforcement over who had the proper jurisdiction to issue the alert created a major delay in finding Ashlynn.

“Within weeks, I started petitions to bring the AMBER Alert to Indian Country,” she said. “I called for action from my friends, the Navajo Nation, and the federal government. And though I was physically exhausted and spiritually broken, I poured my heart into effecting legislative change.”

With the support of late U.S. Senator John McCain and Representative Andy Biggs, both of Arizona, by 2018, the Ashlynn Mike AMBER Alert in Indian Country Act was signed into law—and ultimately led to the creation of AATTAP’s [AMBER Alert in Indian Country Initiative](#). “I’m always reassured whenever I see an AMBER Alert doing what it’s supposed to do,” Foster said.

After Foster’s talk, AATTAP Administrator Rasmussen and AIIC Program Manager Tyesha Wood presented her with a gift “in recognition of her ongoing bravery, generosity, and never-ending

commitment to moving AMBER Alert in Indian Country initiatives forward in memory of Ashlynnne—and all missing children,” Rasmussen said. “Pamela’s tireless work has changed the way we respond to missing children in Indian Country. Today, the Navajo Nation has an AMBER Alert Plan, and many other Tribal nations are working with state and regional partners to ensure that what happened to Ashlynnne never happens again.”

“As painful as Kimber and Pamela’s experiences are to hear, it’s important that we do hear them to help improve our response,” said keynote speaker [Marlys Big Eagle](#).

A member of the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe in South Dakota, Big Eagle serves as the National Native American Outreach Services Liaison for the U.S. Department of Justice, and has worked in criminal justice for more than two decades. Her work centers on the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons (MMIP) Initiative and other public safety issues in Indian Country.

Over and out—and energized

At the conclusion of the Symposium, Rasmussen reminded attendees of what family members of missing children said after finalizing their work on the Family Survival Guide. “When we asked them, ‘If you could tell law enforcement what they need to hear, what would you say?’ One of the parents mentioned earlier, Patty Wetterling, said, ‘We know the work that you do is hard; that you have families to go home to; that the work you’ve done during the day remains with you. But remember: We’re suffering the most horrific event of our lives. So we’re counting on you to do everything possible to bring our child home. But also know that we thank you for everything you do.’”

These and other words of advice and encouragement bolstered conversations long after the Symposium ended. Using the Whova app, attendees could continue discussing how to fund new technology; start and sustain a CART; improve leads management; navigate the changing social media landscape; adapt to the growing number of emergency alert classifications; develop ways to capture data; and keep people properly trained during staffing shortages. They also used the Whova platform to provide important feedback for next year’s Symposium.

Calling the conference “one of the most outstanding ones to date,” Hawaii’s AMBER Alert Coordinator Amanda Leonard also shared this: “On my way home to Honolulu via Houston, as soon as the plane landed, I received an AMBER Alert for a 12-year-old girl abducted in the city. I felt so connected to the Texas law enforcement team working her case and helping her terrified loved ones. The work never ends—and abducted children need us to be prepared to issue a lifesaving AMBER Alert for them.”

[Display text]

“We all know the importance of being together in person. Time and again we’ve heard about cases that were solved and children who were recovered safely because of partnerships established at this event.”

Janell Rasmussen
AATTAP Administrator

[Display text]

As of Dec. 31, 2023, **at least 1,200 children have been returned home safely as a direct result of AMBER Alert.** And at least 180 children have been found with help from Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEAs). Source: [NCMEC](#)

[Display text]

Save the date— and share your successes!

Next year’s Symposium is planned for Feb. 25–26, pending DOJ funding and event approval. (Stay tuned for the location.) “We already have exciting things planned for it,” said Janell Rasmussen, AATTAP Administrator. “One is to formally recognize the exceptional work of an AMBER Alert Coordinator, Missing Persons Clearinghouse Manager, or CART Coordinator.”

Share your team’s success stories by emailing us at askamber@fvtc.edu.

[Display text]

“I appreciated that Kimber Biggs and Pamela Foster took the time to share stories about the worst possible days of their lives. It adds human emotion to the subject, which law enforcement sometimes doesn’t see.”

Symposium participant (via Whova)

[Display text]

Web Extra

‘Warrior Mom’ Pamela Foster speaks directly to Tribal leadership about the need for AMBER Alert training: bit.ly/WarriorMom-AMBERAlerts

[Photos/captions]

1—Photo of two Symposium attendees. Caption for photo: Missing Child Center-Hawaii Coordinator Amanda Leonard and Honolulu Police Department Detective William Oku “hang loose” during a break.

2—Photo of Symposium attendee with badge. Caption for photo: AATTAP Region 4 Liaison Josefina Sabori is honored to wear her badge.

3—Photo of two Symposium attendees by sign. Caption for photo: AMBER Alert Coordinators Janell Twardowski of Minnesota (left) and Melissa Marchant of Wisconsin pose for a photo.

4—Photo of AATTAP Administrator Janell Rasmussen speaking at podium.

5—Photo of Symposium speaker addressing attendees. Caption for photo: AATTAP-NCJTC Instructor/retired FBI Special Agent David Fallon leads a workshop on family member abductions.

6—Photo of two Symposium attendees talking. Caption for photo: Sibling-survivor Kimber Biggs (right) talks with parent-survivor Pamela Foster at the Symposium. “Pamela is such an inspiration to me—and anyone who has endured a similar loss,” Biggs said.

7—Photo of group of Symposium speakers and AATTAP team. Caption for photo: Keynote

speakers for the Symposium—Pamela Foster (front row center), Marlys Big Eagle (front row, second from right), and Kimber Biggs (second row, second from left)—join the AATTAP team after the event.

8—Photo from 1999 of girl standing by bike. Caption for photo: Mikelle Biggs is shown shortly before she was abducted near her Arizona home in 1999. She is still missing.

9—Photo of AMBER Alert lapel pin, a badge, and earrings. Caption for photo: Sibling-survivor Kimber Biggs photographed her AMBER Alert lapel pin and two gifts from Ashlynn's mother, Pamela Foster: a memorial button and a pair of earrings with wording from the Ashlynn Mike AMBER Alert in Indian Country Act of 2018.

10—Photo of two women talking. Caption for photo: The DOJ's Native American Outreach Services Liaison, Marlys Big Eagle (who served as a keynote speaker), discusses her MMIP work with AIIC Program Manager Tyesha Wood.

Credit for photos: AATTAP Staff and Kimber Biggs

SUB-SIDEBAR

2024 Symposium workshops in focus

“The Symposium offers attendees the chance to learn best practices, meet with peers to discuss current issues, identify gaps in service, recognize trends in technology, and improve integration between state and regional AMBER Alert communication plans with federally recognized Tribes from across the nation,” said AATTAP Administrator Janell Rasmussen.

Discussion points included the following, along with numerous case studies as well as regional/Tribal breakout sessions:

Missing child alerts: Decision-making & processes

- AMBER Alert: To activate or not activate
- Family-member abductions and false allegations
- Dispelling myths: Effective use of the NCIC database
- Leads management

Child Abduction Response Teams (CARTs)

- Creating & sustaining a CART
- CART callouts & volunteer management Investigative resources
- National Center for Missing & Exploited Children forensic resources for missing and unidentified children
- Unsolved child abduction cases: Tools & resources
- Child sex trafficking: Law enforcement & advocacy partnerships

AMBER Alert in Indian Country

- The Alaska Perspective
- Resources: Searching for an unresolved missing person
- Providing culturally sensitive support

Southern Border Initiative

- Current trends in southern border abduction cases
-

COVER STORY EXTRA

Healing Through Comfort

For those fortunate enough to witness it, one of the Symposium's most moving moments came in the guise of a small package—one that guest speaker Pamela Foster quietly handed to AATTAP CART Project Coordinator Derek VanLuchene.

Both share a unique bond: Foster is the mother of [Ashlynnne Mike](#), a member of the Navajo Nation who was abducted and murdered in 2016, at the age of 11. And VanLuchene is the brother of [Ryan VanLuchene](#), abducted at age 8 (in the presence of Derek, then 17) and later found murdered not far from his home in rural Montana. Like Ashlynnne, Ryan was sexually assaulted before being killed. "The trauma of knowing that can be unbearable," Foster says.

Foster and VanLuchene first met in 2019 at a Montana training conference with the Blackfeet Nation. "That's when I heard his story," she says. "I had no idea he and I were going through such similar emotions. And since then, our talks have given me such comfort."

Around the time of their meeting, Foster was trying her hand at designing and sewing textile art.

"Quilting gave me an outlet to disappear from the world," she says. "I started giving the quilts to others I'd befriended who were also going through grief."

But she kept thinking of VanLuchene. What could she create for a former police officer "who'd pretty much seen it all—but also was a gentle soul," a sibling-survivor of a violent crime? "I wanted to give him something from my heart—especially because he's doing such good work to help others find missing children," she says.

She pondered the possibilities until last fall, when she learned VanLuchene's beloved dog, Herschel, had died.

"That's when the image came to me. I worked up the courage to design a quilt showing Ryan and Herschel together." Whenever she found time, she worked on the gift, but only finished it the night before leaving her Southern California home to fly to New Orleans.

VanLuchene was deeply moved by the gesture. "What a special gift," he says. "Herschel and I always shared a special connection. It was devastating when he passed this last October. In so many ways he was my comfort dog. So it gives me great peace to see him comforting my brother, Ryan, near the water, which they both loved."

[Display text]

“A lot of healing comes from friends. And now, through that quilt, there’s an invisible thread that connects us. We are both survivors.”

Pamela Foster

[Photo]

1—Photo of Derek VanLuchene and Pamela Foster holding quilt. Caption for photo: Derek VanLuchene (with Pamela Foster) has given the quilt pride of place in his home office. Foster is happy to know he will look at it often there. “I hope each time he sees it he’ll know just how much love it holds for him,” she says.

2—Photo of quilt cropped in to show the boy and dog sitting on dock.

FRONT LINES

Wheels of Justice

The successful search for 9-year-old Charlotte Sena, who vanished while riding her bike in a state park, riveted the nation. It also opened up New York's AMBER Alert Coordinators and case investigators to scrutiny.

By Jody Garlock

As the disappearance of 9-year-old Charlotte Sena from an Upstate New York park in the fall of 2023 began to garner national media attention, the parallels to another case flashed through the mind of Victoria Martuscello, Investigator/Assistant AMBER Alert Coordinator for the New York State Police (NYSP). Shortly before Charlotte was reported missing by her family, her bike had been found abandoned on the side of a road at Moreau Lake State Park. For Martuscello, the report evoked a familiar sense of doom. "It felt like we had a classic case of [Amber Hagerman](#) playing out right in front of our faces," she says, referencing the 9-year-old Texas girl whose 1996 abduction and murder led to the creation of our nation's AMBER Alert program.

Meanwhile, as the critical window of time for the best odds of recovery loomed, Erika Hock, Martuscello's supervisor and the [NYSP](#) Senior Investigator and AMBER Alert Coordinator who issued the AMBER Alert for Charlotte, couldn't help but feel hope was waning.

Conversely, Hock and Martuscello were uplifted to see the hundreds of law enforcement professionals engaged in Charlotte's search, as well as public interest in the case—heightened by the rallying call of New York Governor Kathy Hochul. "I promised her parents we'll find their daughter," she said at a press conference. "She's all of our daughters."

After an expansive search lasting nearly two days, the words "We got her! We got her!" bellowed through a speaker phone at the Saratoga County command post. The fact that the fourth-grader was alive and well brought cheers throughout the post and community at large.

Charlotte's rescue was nothing short of a miracle. Her case had defied the odds. But it would also test the fortitude of New York's AMBER Alert plan—and offers lessons for other agencies. (See "Five key takeaways at the end of this story.")

Saturday, September 30, 2023, was a beautiful autumn day in the foothills of New York's Adirondack Mountains. The Sena family was enjoying the weekend with friends in two wooded camping spots at Moreau Lake State Park, about 45 miles north of Albany (and 20 minutes from the Sena's home).

Throughout the day, Charlotte, clad in a tie-dye T-shirt, had been riding her green and blue mountain bike with her siblings and friends around the camping loop, a tree-canopied road ringed with campsites close to the park's entrance. By dinnertime, most of Charlotte's group were ready to call it a day, but she wanted to make one final loop on her own. When she didn't return as expected, her parents began searching for her, as did other campers—all of them calling out for the girl in the forested park.

Within 20 minutes (about 6:45 p.m.), Charlotte's dad and a friend found her bike on the side of the camping loop road, but she was nowhere in sight. That alarmed her mother enough to call 911.

New York State Police Troopers arrived on the scene to canvass for information. They soon learned that shortly before Charlotte went missing, a couple at the campground had come across a bike blocking the middle of the road where they were driving. With its kickstand down, they assumed the rider had parked there temporarily, so the driver beeped the horn hoping its owner would come back and move it. But after several minutes without a response, they decided to move it to the side of the road and continue their drive.

Based on the bike's orderly position, officers initially didn't think foul play was involved, Hock explains. "They thought she'd wandered into the woods and gotten lost. Nothing pointed to an abduction."

With nightfall looming, the search intensified. Around 11 p.m., the Missing Persons Clearinghouse issued a missing child alert and distributed a poster with Charlotte's photo. Ultimately hundreds of searchers—including police officers, forest rangers, trained canines, drone operators, underwater recovery teams, firefighters, technology experts, volunteers, and the state's Bureau of Criminal Investigation— joined in to try to find the missing girl.

Without any sign of Charlotte by early Sunday morning, a NYSP lieutenant and support staff updated Hock, who agreed there was "reasonable cause" to conclude she was in danger, and likely had been abducted, thereby meeting New York's [criteria](#) to issue an AMBER Alert.

At 9:30 a.m., Hock issued an AMBER Alert geo-targeting two regions skirting the park. At that point in the investigation, an FBI Child Abduction Rapid Deployment (CARD) team joined the investigation. (New York's statewide Child Abduction Response Team (CART) was in development at the time.) The governor put out a plea for the child's safe return. Major news outlets began reporting the story, and hundreds of tips poured in. Still, the 9-year-old's whereabouts remained a mystery.

As word of Charlotte's disappearance circulated, the Sena home in Greenfield received a steady flow of traffic from well-wishers—known and unknown— who dropped off messages of support. While the distraught family remained at the park, their house was under police surveillance. Nothing seemed unusual until around 4:30 a.m. Monday, when a dark F-150 pickup truck pulled up to the mailbox and placed something in it.

The trooper watching the home, unable to record the license plate, immediately retrieved the item, and saw it was a crudely produced ransom note—and a critical piece of evidence. As authorities began a search for vehicles matching the truck's description and conducted other analytical data, they also expedited a fingerprint analysis on the ransom note. Then came a lucky break: A fingerprint was found on the note. And what's more, it matched that of 46-year-old Craig N. Ross Jr., who had been arrested in 1999 for driving while intoxicated.

By then, the state's Cellular Analysis Response Team had verified that Ross's cellular device was in the vicinity of the park when Charlotte disappeared, so authorities obtained search warrants for addresses linked to Ross. Around 6:30 that evening, tactical teams swarmed a ramshackle

camper on Ross's mother's property. Ross briefly resisted arrest, but ultimately Charlotte was found safe in a bedroom closet. Ross was arrested and charged with kidnapping, and later would be charged with sexual assault. In February 2024, he pleaded guilty to those charges.

As Ross awaits sentencing, Hock and Martuscello continue to field questions about how the case was handled. While there are lessons to learn from every case, the key takeaway for both investigators was that adhering to the state's protocol for issuing AMBER Alerts worked. From the outset, their investigative team worked quickly to find Charlotte using comprehensive investigative strategies and tools. The public was alerted once the criteria had been met—and only in a specific area where the 9-year-old was likely to be. The goal is to provide the public with information that can help, rather than confuse, efforts to locate a missing child. Strategic, targeted alerting helps prevent people from becoming de-sensitized to AMBER Alerts, which can be a deadly consequence of public indifference.

Both Hock and Martuscello remain confident in their roles and the established protocols. "I have friends ask why AMBER Alerts aren't issued for every missing child, but if you get an AMBER Alert every time a child goes missing, your phone would be going off all day long," Martuscello says. "I ask them what they think they would do because of that. They say, 'You're right, I would turn off that alert.'"

[Photos/captions]

1—Photo of officers walking near campground at Moreau Lake State Park. Photo credit: Lori Van Buren/Times Union

2—Photo of officers and vehicles on road at Moreau Lake State Park. Photo credit: Mike Groll/Office of Governor Kathy Hochul. Combined caption for photos 1 and 2: "We didn't have a vehicle, we didn't have a suspect, we didn't have anything," AMBER Alert Coordinator Erika Hock says of issuing the alert for Charlotte Sena after an intensive search at Moreau Lake State Park. "All we could do was put out her picture. We had nothing else to go by or give the public." Adds Assistant AMBER Alert Coordinator Victoria Martuscello: "It was like she vanished into thin air."

3—Photo of Moreau Lake State Park sign. Photo credit: Steve Thurston/The Post-Star.

4—Image of the AMBER Alert showing a photo of the missing girl, Charlotte E. Sena.

5—Photo of Governor Kathy Hochul at press conference in park. Photo credit: WNYT NewsChannel 13. Caption for photo: New York Governor Kathy Hochul leads a press conference at the park, saying, "We are leaving no stone, no branch, no table, no cabin unturned, untouched, or unexamined" in the search for the missing girl.

6—Photo of Craig N. Ross Jr. upon booking at the Saratoga County jail. Photo credit: Saratoga County Sheriff's Office.

7—Photo of camper where authorities found Charlotte Sena. Photo credit: Fox News Digital.

Caption for photos 6 and 7: Craig N. Ross Jr. was booked at the Saratoga County jail shortly after tactical teams found Charlotte in his camper.

8—Photo of law enforcement authorities at the command center. Photo credit: New York State Police. Caption for photo: NYSP Senior Investigator and AMBER Alert Coordinator Erika Hock (center) was among the relieved authorities at the command center during Charlotte's safe recovery.

[Display text]

“The New York AMBER Alert Coordinators did an outstanding job of monitoring the investigation and ultimately activating the alert with little to go on other than Charlotte had simply vanished. The lessons learned will be beneficial for all who handle missing child alerts.”

Joan Collins

AMBER Alert Training & Technical Assistance Program Region One Liaison

[Display text]

From 2021 to 2023, 3 out of 548 missing child alerts* (.5% of all cases) were known to involve ransom requests. *Excluding alerts that were classified as unfounded or hoaxes.

Source: National Center for Missing & Exploited Children

SUB-SIDEBAR

Five key takeaways

“This case had so many aspects that defied the odds,” says Erika Hock, New York State Police Senior Investigator and AMBER Alert Coordinator. Here she shares insights on what she learned—with lessons other Coordinators can apply.

Be prepared for scrutiny and criticism. Any case—but especially a high-profile one—underscores the need to meticulously follow protocols. Members of the public and media often don’t understand how and why AMBER Alerts are issued, Hock explains, so “as an AMBER Alert Coordinator, you can’t have a weak spine. These cases aren’t cut and dried—each one has a gray area. It’s not easy to make the decisions but you have to [using the information you have at the time].”

Act without delay on the information you have. Having critical details—a license plate number or description of the suspected abductor—helps find missing children faster, but sometimes AMBER Alert Coordinators must alert the public using only a photo and description of the missing child. Geo-targeting focuses the information on the people most likely to see the child, and prevents citizens within a large area from receiving alerts that might prompt them to disable their cellphone’s AMBER Alert function.

Understand that cases are fluid. Some New Yorkers questioned why there wasn’t an immediate AMBER Alert, or why they didn’t receive the notification in their region—which prompted a New York legislator to begin pushing a bill to allow parents or guardians to request early activation. New York’s criteria for an activation specifies “reasonable cause”—defined as an eyewitness account or the elimination of other possibilities—to believe a child has been abducted. Without an eyewitness, Hock knew to let the initial search rule out possibilities, such as Charlotte being injured from falling down an embankment. She was also prepared to expand the alert to other activation regions in the state if new information warranted.

Make it a team effort. Hock advises AMBER Alert Coordinators to loop in their Public Information Officer as soon as the decision to activate is made. That person or team can then help the media and public understand the criteria.

Cultivate relationships with state law enforcement agencies. In the Sena case, some officers had previously worked in Hock’s unit, and thus were familiar with the activation criteria. “In the past we’ve had demands to activate an AMBER Alert when it’s not even close to meeting our criteria,” Hock says. “But we have these criteria for a reason, and take the time to explain it to agencies [and the public] so they can understand.”

[Photo]

1—Photo of a child’s mountain-style bike silhouetted against wild grasses.

FACES

A Shining Light

Following her service on the Not Invisible Act Commission, Michigan's Jolene Hardesty is dedicated to bringing Native American partners to the table as 'advisors and equals.'

By Rebecca Sherman

Jolene Hardesty has faced challenges in her 20 years of public service—from her early days as a 911 sheriff's office dispatcher to her current role as Missing Children's Clearinghouse Analyst and Missing Persons Coordinator for the Michigan State Police. And while she has helped rescue an estimated 600 children by providing analytical, resource, and training support to regional, state, federal, and Tribal law enforcement, she can now count another challenging assignment as a win: 15 months of service on the [Not Invisible Act Commission](#).

Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer appointed Hardesty to the Commission in 2022, citing her "extensive experience collaborating with local, state, and federal law enforcement to find and recover missing children." For Hardesty, the experience was equal parts daunting, rewarding, and eye-opening. She worked with 35 others from across the nation to fulfill the Commission's goals, as follows.

- Identify, report, and respond to cases of missing and murdered Indigenous people (MMIP) and human trafficking.
- Develop legislative and administrative changes to enlist federal programs, properties, and resources to help combat the crisis.
- Track and report data on MMIP and human trafficking cases.
- Consider issues related to the hiring and retention of law enforcement officers.
- Coordinate Tribal, state, and federal resources to combat MMIP and human trafficking on Indian lands.
- Increase information-sharing with Tribal governments on violent crimes investigations and criminal prosecutions on Indian lands.

The Commission held hearings across the nation, receiving heartbreaking yet critically important testimony from hundreds of victims, survivors, family members, family advocates, and members of law enforcement. In the fall of 2023, Hardesty and her fellow Commissioners submitted their [final report](#) to U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland, the U.S. Department of the Interior Secretary Deb Haaland, and Congress.

With May designated as [Missing and Murdered Indigenous Peoples \(MMIP\) Awareness Month](#) (and [May 5, National MMIP Day](#), also known as "Wear Red Day") we talked with Hardesty about her work on the Not Invisible Act Commission—and what's on the horizon.

Tell us a bit about your work on the Not Invisible Act Commission.

Each day was spent gearing up and prepping for meetings. I read a lot—federal statutes, statistical reports, and notes from other initiatives prior to the Not Invisible Act, such as [Operation Lady Justice](#). Many weeks we met multiple times and brought in subject-matter experts to answer questions. I also gave in-person [congressional] testimony in D.C. as an expert on missing children, and traveled to Minnesota and Montana for public testimony. We were organized into subcommittees based on our experience. I was co-chair of Subcommittee Two, which focused on MMIP data. And on Subcommittee Four, we looked at coordinating resources, criminal jurisdiction, prosecution, and information sharing— for instance, understanding how the NCIC [National Crime Information Center] database is aggregated, and what shortfalls it presents.

How does the way data is collected present a problem?

In NCIC, there aren't enough race categories—it's either "Alaska Native" or "American Indian." Beyond that, it's also important to know if a person is a member of the Cherokee or Crow Nation, for instance, or maybe also affiliated with another Tribe. Grouping people into one category doesn't serve justice when you are at the granular level of an investigation.

Why is the term "Indian" still used by government officials?

Growing up I was taught that term was offensive, but during my work for the Commission, I learned that when you're speaking about Native American land, the legal term is "Indian Country." Additionally, Alaskan Natives don't like being called "Indian"—they live on Alaskan land. But if we explain why we need to use the term in certain circumstances, it goes a long way to show respect. I found that changed the entire conversation when talking with Native partners.

How have you built bridges of respect with your Native American partners?

By creating relationships. I reached out to our Mount Pleasant post in Michigan and the Saginaw Chippewa Tribe Police Chief and asked them to be experts on relationship matters. Michigan is home to 12 federally recognized Tribes and a few that are not. And in the state's not-so-distant past, there were at least three state-funded Indian boarding schools, where Indigenous people were not allowed to speak their language, celebrate traditions, or practice their religion. Because of that, Native American law enforcement partners and citizens often associate non-Native [law enforcement/legal] personnel with trauma. It's important to acknowledge that, to tell them you understand why they may not trust us. Relationships built on a foundation of mutual respect are critical. You've got to be able to have difficult conversations with one another honestly and openly, and still be able to respect each other. Accomplishing this is possible, but takes intentional work on both sides.

Tell us about the importance of cultural awareness and historical training.

Learning about the culture really helps. For example, when non-Native people get sick, they go to the doctor. But for Native peoples, it's very different. [When going to] Indian Health Service care, a person is asked, "How much Indian are you, and what kind?" Some clinics only serve members of certain Tribes. All that matters before treatment. So that's the kind of thing our Indian partners face on Indian land. Historical awareness is also important [to understand inherent conflicts between Tribes]. Many were warring Tribes for generations before [the U.S. government] put them on the same reservation and said, "Be happy."

How have you approached the complexities involved in working with different Tribes?

Every Tribe needs its own voice to be heard, and this takes significant communication and collaboration. The best way to address our Tribal partners' needs is to ask them. We should ask them not only "What do you need?" but also, "What can I help you with?"

As you reflect on your Commission work, what's next for you?

My work on the Commission was some of the hardest I've done. It was frustrating at times, and I had a huge learning curve, but I feel like I've helped, and know I've made connections with some phenomenal people. And while I'm sad to see the Commission's work come to an end, I look forward to the next goal: Implementing AMBER Alert in Indian Country. For many of us on the Commission, the focus will be to bring our Native American partners to the table as advisors, equals, and subject-matter experts. Together, we can really address their needs.

[Display text]

"During our hearings in Minnesota, Lieutenant Governor Peggy Flanagan, a member of the White Earth Band of Ojibwe, said, 'At best we are invisible, at worst we are disposable.' That really got to me—and was the driving force behind my work."

Jolene Hardesty

Michigan State Police Analyst discussing her work on the Not Invisible Act Commission

[Display text]

The Not Invisible Act Commission received testimony from more than 250 surviving victims, families, and others.

[Photos/captions]

1—Head-and-shoulders portrait of Jolene Hardesty

2—Group photo that includes Jolene Hardesty. Caption for photo: Jolene Hardesty (far right) is shown with fellow members of the Not Invisible Act Commission. The team completed a year-plus assignment to study and report on the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous people.

SUB-SIDEBAR

Not Invisible Act: Key findings

Jolene Hardesty shares thoughts from her Not Invisible Act Commission work.

Resources are desperately needed. “We heard testimony from an Alaska Native woman whose sister was murdered in her home—and she lay dead on the floor for three days because no police came to investigate,” Hardesty says. “There are also villages in Alaska that don’t have a fire department; villages that take a State Trooper three days by airplane to reach; and villages where Tribes don’t have a police department—or if they do, officers are not staffed 24/7. These departments lack the funding, resources, people, or skill sets to have an appropriate response, much less an immediate one.”

Jurisdiction can be a problematic puzzle. In Oklahoma, where [nearly half](#) the land is Tribal owned, “you have a checkerboard of different Tribes, and criminal jurisdiction isn’t clear,” she says. For instance, a crime that happens on the northwest quadrant of a street may be the responsibility of a different Tribe than one on the southwest quadrant. And if the crime is murder, another jurisdiction may need to be involved. “Keeping up with the matrix needed to determine who’s going to respond to a crime can be overwhelming,” she says.

Justice is often meted out differently. “Tribal law enforcement and courts are limited in what they can do [and often include social-rehabilitation measures]. If a murder occurs on Indian land, the most jail time imposed [may be] nine years,” Hardesty says.

NEWS BRIEFS: UNITED STATES

GPS bracelet helps Florida deputies find child

It was nearing dusk one Sunday evening last November when Hillsborough County deputies in Tampa, Florida, were notified about a missing 9-year-old child with autism. With weather conditions worsening, deputies could not use an air unit to help search for the child, but a SafetyNet [bracelet](#) he was wearing allowed them to pinpoint his location. SafetyNet works by allowing law enforcement agencies access to GPS information from bracelets worn by those with cognitive conditions when they go missing. The child, who was hiding behind an air conditioning unit, was found about 20 minutes after the signal was detected.

Exchange student rescued after online scam

When Chinese exchange student Kai Zhuang was reported missing in December from his host high school in Riverdale, Utah, authorities traced his location by analyzing call data and bank records. Police found the 17-year-old alone in a tent in rural Utah, amid freezing temperatures and with limited food and water, the apparent victim of a [cyber-kidnapping](#) scam. Zhuang was unharmed, but the damage was done—his parents in China had already paid “kidnappers” an \$80,000 ransom. Zhuang’s case represents a growing type of [fraud](#) where cybercriminals target exchange students, particularly Chinese students, tricking them into believing their families are being threatened. They force terrified victims to take photos of themselves bound and gagged, which are then used to coerce the family into paying ransom. The cyber kidnappers continue to extort the family by using photos and voice recordings of the victim that give the impression the kidnappers are with the victim and causing them harm, Riverdale police said. With the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI), experts believe the crimes will continue.

John Walsh partners with NCMEC, returns to TV

In the aftermath of his son Adam’s kidnapping and murder in 1981, [John Walsh](#) became a victim’s rights activist, political lobbyist, and creator of the TV program, “America’s Most Wanted,” which he hosted until 2013. The popular show was credited with helping solve missing child cases, including the kidnapping of Elizabeth Smart, featured on one of its episodes. In January, Walsh returned to “America’s Most Wanted,” this time with son Callahan Walsh as co-host and co-producer. To help find more missing kids, “America’s Most Wanted” is also working directly with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC). “Partnering with [NCMEC](#) is so vital to the return of ‘America’s Most Wanted,’” said Callahan, who is also the executive director of NCMEC’s Florida office. “By featuring these cases on the show, we’re putting these missing children in front of a national audience...It’s going to be such a powerful tool to help bring kids home.”

NEWS BRIEFS: INDIAN COUNTRY

[New DNA tests can help identify missing Native Americans and solve crimes](#)

Advances in rapid DNA sequencing are helping to solve missing persons cases long gone cold, such as that of 20-year-old Ashley Loring Heavyrunner, who disappeared from Montana's Blackfeet Reservation in 2017. New [testing kits](#) can extract thousands of genetic markers from unidentified human remains, making it easier to link them to missing persons. Because few genetic data are available for Native Americans, Hopi Tribe member [Haley Omeasoo](#), a classmate and distant relative of Heavyrunner, decided to pursue forensic anthropology to help locate missing Indigenous people. As a Ph.D. student at the University of Montana, Omeasoo and her graduate advisor, anthropologist Meradeth Snow, are working with the Blackfeet Tribe to create a DNA database of tribal members that can be compared with unidentified human remains. More than 4,000 sets of human remains are found in the U.S. each year; about a quarter remain unidentified, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Nearly 5,500 reports of missing Indigenous women and girls were filed in 2022 alone. Omeasoo is hopeful Ashley Heavyrunner will be found alive, but she knows that her DNA work could ultimately identify her friend's remains. If that happens, she hopes it will at least give the family closure.

[Ottawa begins work on 'Red Dress Alert' for missing Indigenous women and girls](#)

Leah Gazan, a member of Canada's Parliament, is leading discussions on a proposed ["Red Dress Alert"](#) system for missing Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit (gender-diverse) people, who face a murder rate six times that of other females. Similar to AMBER Alerts for children, Red Dress notifications would be sent to the public on their phones. Ottawa, which recognized the crisis as a national emergency, included funding for an alert system in the federal budget in March 2023. Calling it a matter of life or death, Gazan is urging the federal government to implement the Red Dress program before the next election.

[Two Iowa sisters become a voice for missing and murdered Indigenous people](#)

Despite being separated during childhood, two Sioux City, Iowa, sisters and members of the Winnebago Tribe [reunited](#) as adults and set out to learn more about their Native American heritage. While digging into their family history, Trisha Rivers and Jessica Lopez-Walker learned of an aunt, Paulette "Paulie" Walker, who left Iowa for California in 1984, and shortly afterward was murdered. The sisters struggled to understand why no one reported the young woman missing, and now aim to have her remains returned to Iowa for burial near family. Their aunt, whose case remains unsolved, is one of the countless Indigenous women who suffer disproportionately [higher rates](#) of violence, sexual assault, and murder compared to the rest of the U.S. population. The sisters' work with the nonprofit organization [Great Plains Action Society](#) involves helping find missing or murdered Indigenous people (MMIP) and providing support for other issues Iowa's Indigenous population faces. Native Americans made up 1.5 percent of missing persons cases in Iowa, despite the state's Native American population accounting for less than one half of 1 percent, according to an Iowa Public Radio report. "Native women and girls, our relatives, are not expendable," Rivers said, adding that they're seeking better treatment for Native communities.

NEWS BRIEFS: INTERNATIONAL

New photo technology helps find missing kids

A novel use of technology is helping to locate missing children around the world, including 9-year-old Phillista Waithera, who vanished in Nairobi in 2021. Two years later, she was reunited with her immediate family with the use of [Face Age Progression](#) (FAP) technology, which utilizes an Artificial Intelligence (AI) app to create photos of the child to show what they would look like now. In 2021 alone, the Kenyan nonprofit Missing Child Kenya Foundation located 298 children using AI, according to CEO and founder Maryanna Munyendo. And in central China's Hubei Province, a group of students at the Huazhong University of Science and Technology (HUST) developed an AI system to restore and enhance old blurry [photos](#) of children who went missing decades earlier. More than 1,000 photos have been restored to improve clarity, helping reunite 11 missing children, like Sun Zhuo, a 4-year-old [abducted](#) in 2007 from his daycare in Shenzhen Province and rejoined with his biological parents in 2021 at age 18.

Ongoing efforts return 'stolen' Ukraine children

Ukraine officials have identified more than 19,000 [children](#) illegally removed from their homes and taken to Russia or Russia-controlled territory since the war began in February 2022. In some cases, Russian authorities took hundreds of children from Ukrainian orphanages and schools, according to Russian documents gathered by Lyudmyla Denisova, a former Ukraine human rights official. Many children were removed on the pretext of rescuing them from the [war](#) zone, or lured with the promise of attending camp. Others were taken from hospitals. Russian authorities have placed children with foster families, and President Vladimir Putin opened the way for Russian families to adopt Ukrainian children. The Russian strategy is deliberate, premeditated, and systematic, according to evidence collected by Ukrainian and international human rights and war crimes organizations. In March 2023, The International Criminal Court (ICC) issued [arrest warrants](#) for Putin and another official, a move that has made it easier to return children. Charities such as Save Ukraine and SOS Children's Villages Ukraine have taken up the cause, and in recent months have tracked down and returned 387 children to their families.

Report: Migrant children still missing in Ireland

Dozens of migrant children who sought protection after fleeing war-torn countries have vanished in Ireland since 2017. A 2023 [report](#) published by University College Dublin's (UCD) Sexual Exploitation Research Programme (SERP) indicates some of the children were victims of organized sexual exploitation. Of the 62 who are missing, 44 have reached their 18th birthday and, because they are no longer minors, child welfare has ceased searching for them. MECPATHS (Mercy Efforts for Child Protection Against Trafficking with the Hospitality and Services Sectors), a nonprofit group raising awareness of child trafficking and exploitation in Ireland, said the report confirmed what frontline workers have been telling the organization for years. "Sexual exploitation, forced labor, forced begging, criminal exploitation, forced marriage, the removal of organs, and domestic servitude—it is all happening in Ireland," said Ann Mara, the organization's education manager. "So, the fact that these children are missing, and there is a kind of a shrug of the shoulders, is just mind-boggling."