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AMBER ADVOCATE 57



The AMBER Advocate, 2024 Issue 1

New Year, New Tech

Gear up for the innovative new technology that experts predict will make your work easier and more successful

PLUS:

- Quick regional collaboration leads to toddler's safe recovery in Mexico
- Myth vs reality: International parental child abductions
- AMBER Alert-related news from across the U.S., Indian Country, and the globe
- All the resources you need are just a click away

[Photo]

Several images illustrating technology advances/trends for 2024

COVER STORY: MAIN FEATURE

Have a (Tech-Savvy) New Year

As 2024 unfolds here are our tech experts' top 5 'game-changing' innovations for law enforcement

By Jody Garlock

Each second felt like an eternity as Eddie Bertola stared at the blank screen in front of him. While composing an AMBER Alert for the California Highway Patrol, then-Sergeant Bertola was all too aware that a child's life depended on him getting the procedure right. That's why he dedicated himself to learning everything he could about alerting technology—and became very good at his job.

We recently caught up with Bertola, and fellow AMBER Alert Training & Technical Assistance Program (AATTAP) Associate Instructor Tony Godwin, to find out what new or emerging technological tools are on their radars for 2024—and think they should be on yours too.

While Eddie Bertola and Tony Godwin have taken different paths in law enforcement, both nationally respected professionals embrace the significant role that technology plays in helping prevent, and find, missing and exploited children.

After 15 years with the California Highway Patrol, Bertola now serves as an Associate with the National Criminal Justice Training Center (NCJTC), and AATTAP, helping train law enforcement to use the latest technological tools and resources to operate better and faster. He's also working with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to test new software that can generate exacting emergency messages with just a few clicks.

NCJTC/AATTAP Associate Godwin is a veteran detective with the Garland Police Department in Texas, and a member of the North Texas Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) Task Force. He remembers when "high tech" meant the ability to send emails. Now he's a certified cellphone and computer forensics examiner who investigates child exploitation and other crimes against children that occur in areas where young people may be lured into a false sense of safety, such as a gaming app's chat room. The combined knowledge of Godwin and Bertola is invaluable for law enforcement trainees.

1. Message Design Dashboard: Building a better WEA

New message-writing software is in development that will allow for more effective Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEAs)—not only to spur the public into action, but also to lessen the pressure on officials tasked with writing and disseminating the alerts.

The [Message Design Dashboard](#), developed by the Center for Technology in Government at the University at Albany in New York, creates a common structure so that alerting authorities can compile consistent messaging via easy-to-use dropdown menus and prompts.

The Dashboard stems from a FEMA-funded **project** to support the agency’s Integrated Public Alert and Warning System ([IPAWS](#)), which powers and authenticates the nation’s emergency alerts.

The Dashboard project used research to develop the software, which factored in social science to form clear, actionable messaging. The software should be ready for use with AMBER Alert messaging in early 2024 says Jeannette Sutton, a University at Albany professor who heads the project and specializes in disaster and risk.

Bertola and Sutton emphasize the ease of using the Dashboard, where users can click desired descriptors from dropdown menus. As each answer is selected, the message is automatically built in a preview box at the side of the screen, with all content remaining editable. “We believe a common structure will improve messaging and get people to follow a consistent set of information and style of writing,” Sutton says.

The software tracks the character count, building a 90-character message that IPAWS requires, along with a 360-character message that most of today’s devices can receive. Hyperlinks are also checked to ensure they don’t go to an invalid page, which can erode public trust in the process.

“It’s very new, very needed, and it’s going to have a really big impact,” says Bertola, who’s been involved in the Message Design Dashboard’s beta testing. “Message creation will lot faster—and empowering for the public that receives the alert.”

“The public has a growing desire to help and provide information, especially when it comes to missing children,” Bertola adds. “People want to feel like they are part of the solution.”

2. Flock Safety: Real-time vehicle intelligence

One product that's making a marked difference in how police officers do their jobs is [Flock Safety](#), a system with high-quality cameras, video, and other technology that reads license plates in order to offer real-time actionable intelligence.

"It's been the biggest game-changer for us," Godwin says. "It's really altered how we work in law enforcement."

Thirty years ago, the process of running tags and finding a vehicle was "almost like trying to catch a unicorn," he says. With Flock Safety, officers receive alerts when a wanted vehicle passes by a camera. The notifications give the reason for the alert, date/time, and which camera the vehicle drove past. The alert also sends a picture of the vehicle, the license plate, and a map location.

In September 2023, Flock Safety equipment helped Elizabethtown, Kentucky, police safely [recover](#) a toddler caught up in a carjacking.

"Of all the years I've been doing this, I can't think of ... a more game-changing piece of technology for law enforcement," said Elizabethtown Police Chief Jeremy Thompson when asking the city council for more Flock cameras to be added to the system that was been installed six months earlier. "I've heard council members say that if we recover one kidnapped child, it was worth it. And in my opinion, no truer words have been spoken."

Flock gathers only open source data, such as car tag information. The cameras read license plates only; they don't identify motorists (there's no facial recognition) or record speeds. The system, which uses artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning, sends an alert to law enforcement only if the vehicle has been entered into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database, such as if it's a stolen vehicle or wanted in connection with an AMBER Alert, or if an officer has entered it as a follow-up on an investigation. Data collected is deleted after 30 days.

At \$2,500 per camera per year, the system is decidedly an investment. but if such a cost is prohibitive, traditional license plate recognition (LPR) technology is still beneficial.

"Learn to use technology and treat it as evidence when necessary," Godwin advises.

3. Doorbell cameras: Public-engaging technology

Crime-fighting technology is branching beyond expensive equipment in patrol cars and computers in the office. Everyday consumer technology, such as doorbell cameras available for as little as \$60, has emerged as a valuable resource to help law enforcement piece together investigations and prosecute cases.

“The growing public engagement in this area is one of the things I’m most excited about,” Bertola says.

He expects a continued increase in the public’s proactive sharing of video from a doorbell or security system, car dashboard, and cellphone cameras when they think it may help—rather than officers having to knock on doors and ask for the information.

“This type of rapid exchange of information is huge,” Bertola says. “Law enforcement seems to be starting to focus on harnessing that.”

Some agencies have begun mapping subdivisions and other areas to note places with doorbell or other security cameras.

“Doing little things like that is going to help with trust in the community,” Bertola says. “And as the community sees this, they’ll become even more willing to share and be a partner.”

4. Open Source Intelligence: Digging deep for answers

“Any investigation into a child’s disappearance should include Open Source Intelligence ([OSINT](#)),” Godwin says. He considers it “one of the most crucial law enforcement techniques in the digital world.”

OSINT is an umbrella term for collecting and analyzing data from publicly available sources, much of it via the Internet, for intelligence purposes. Its origins date to World War II, when William Donovan began using it for the Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency. “It’s an important tool as we are looking into investigations, especially reactive ones where we don’t know much about our person,” Godwin says.

“OSINT knowledge is a perishable skill. If you’re not doing it on a regular basis, you’re missing out on valuable resources,” Godwin says.

Most crimes today leave digital traces, and OSINT picks up those fragments of data. The information is vast, so an OSINT framework provides links to the best resources to easily find information about a target and browse various OSINT tools. *(See related infographic in our [online version](#) of this story.)*

The main types of OSINT resources are mass media (such as print, digital, TV, radio); “gray literature” (such as documents and reports from charities, census data, and academic publications); and social media.

Web searches themselves encompass three categories: surface web, which is the traditional method/platform; the deep web/dark net, which requires a specific URL or IP address; and the dark web, which requires special tools, such as the anonymizing browser [Tor](#). *(See related illustration on page 8 of the print edition.)*

The OSINT cycle starts with planning to ensure there’s a clear understanding of the types of information needed. It then proceeds to collecting, processing, and analyzing the data before the intelligence is ultimately disseminated. The process is time-consuming, which is why Godwin is encouraged to see departments hiring full-time crime analysts to lead the charge and ensure information is gathered effectively and ethically.

5. Artificial intelligence: Growing & evolving

No technology has exploded more in recent times than artificial intelligence ([AI](#)). It's considered the next big thing, even though machine learning dates to the 1950s. "AI is not yet widely used internally, but it will be," Godwin says.

Police departments around the United States already use a form of AI in image recognition technology that reads license plates and other vehicle information. Similarly, Godwin expects facial recognition technology to become a "more powerful and more important" tool in improving efficiencies in law enforcement and getting criminals off the streets.

"There are so many cameras everywhere you go," he says. "I think that's where the future will go for us, making it much easier to solve crimes." (Facial recognition technology helped authorities identify some of the rioters who stormed the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. More recently, authorities in the United Kingdom used it to investigate child exploitation cold cases, which led to the arrest of a Missouri man.)

Analytically, AI is being used in criminal investigations to help sift through vast amounts of data. The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) uses [Logikcull](#) to filter, gather, and package information for law enforcement and prosecutors. The AI tool has saved NCMEC thousands of hours, allowing its legal staff to operate more efficiently.

The downsides of AI include deepfake technology that can convincingly mimic a person's physical appearance and voice. Last year, federal officials even issued warnings about virtual kidnapping fraud that uses AI to clone a loved one's voice.

Godwin expects deepfake detection apps and tools to make strides, though they are evolving. Detection tools already available include Google's [SynthID](#) and Meta's [Stable Signature](#), which embed digital watermarks in video and audio; [Pindrop](#) and [Veridas](#), which examines details such as how sounds of words sync up with a speaker's mouth; and [AntiFake](#), which scrambles an audio signal to make it harder to be cloned by AI.

As deepfake technology becomes more sophisticated, some experts are calling on the federal government to regulate it. Critics claim that law enforcement's use of AI technology could infringe on privacy and civil rights, leading to false arrests. There is also concern that "automation bias"—a person's propensity to trust automated systems over their own judgment—could have authorities failing to look critically at the information in question.

Godwin knows that organizations will need to balance the risk and rewards of AI, which U.S. Department of Justice Deputy Attorney General Lisa Monaco calls one of "the most important issues we face in law enforcement, national security, the protection of privacy, and civil

liberties.”

The DOJ’s [Emerging Technology Board](#), recently established to govern AI, aims to monitor its complexities while also promoting its ethical, responsible use. The Board also plans to share best practices with law enforcement.

[Photos/captions]

1— In Elizabethtown, Kentucky, a carjacking with a 7-month-old child inside the vehicle proved Flock Safety’s effectiveness. As local police began working to meet the state criteria to issue an AMBER Alert, they also tapped into Flock technology via cameras that had been installed at major intersections. In less than an hour, they were able to locate the vehicle, abandoned, with the child safe inside—and ultimately arrest the perpetrator.

2— In 2022, a Ring doorbell camera [documented](#) the attempted abduction of a 6-year-old Ohio girl who was taking out the family’s trash. A man grabbed her and started dragging her down the sidewalk but released her due to her screams. The video helped authorities apprehend the abductor.

COVER STORY: SIDEBAR

Be on the lookout: [More tech advances](#)

Better Equipping Indian Country

FEDERAL WINS:

- On November 30, 2023, the U.S. Department of the Interior established a new Office of Indigenous Communications and Technology (**OICT**) to assist Tribal Nations in managing, developing, and maintaining broadband infrastructure, new electromagnetic spectrum leasing mechanisms, and in providing technical assistance for the establishment of wireless, digital, and technological projects on Tribal lands.
- The Biden administration has pledged nearly \$3 billion to expand access to broadband on Tribal lands. The **Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program**, part of the White House’s “Internet for All Initiative,” has so far awarded \$1.86 billion in grants to 226 Tribal communities to build high-speed Internet infrastructures, establish affordable Internet access programs, and support digital inclusion projects.

AMBER ALERT IN INDIAN COUNTRY:

- The AATTAP’s AMBER Alert in Indian Country (**AICC**) team is continuing to distribute **Technology Toolkits** to Tribal law enforcement agencies from Alabama to Washington. Equipped with a rugged portable case, Toughbook tablet, digital camera, and more, the toolkits provide Tribal authorities with additional resources to best respond to cases of missing and abducted children. “Tribal communities have long lacked access to high-speed Internet, limiting their ability in the field—especially in remote areas where rugged terrain makes it difficult to build infrastructure,” says AICC Program Manager Tyesha Wood.
- The AICC has partnered with the First Responder Network Authority (**FirstNet**) to offer high-speed, wireless Internet service to select Tribes. Congress established the independent authority to develop a nationwide broadband network dedicated to public safety. More than 70 Tribal nations use FirstNet, and in the last two years, coverage (through AT&T) has increased more than 40 percent on federally recognized Tribal lands.
- The Navajo Nation, the largest Indian reservation in the U.S., spanning three states—is **building** a vast modern communications system. The Navajo Tribal Utility Authority earmarked its \$50 million grant to fund 11 new telecommunications towers, install more than 200 miles of fiber and cable/wireless broadband equipment, and increase or connect high-speed Internet to more than 20,000 Native American households. It also aims to enhance mobile broadband connectivity for first responders.

NCMEC's QR Code to the rescue

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) is confident one of its newest tech-smart initiatives—using a [QR code](#) on missing child posters—can revolutionize the search for endangered missing children.

By scanning the poster's QR code with a cell phone, the user can get much more information than what a poster typically would allow. Users can also access photos and descriptive details for all missing children reported within a 50-mile radius. "Instead of sharing one missing child poster, the public can view all missing children in their immediate area, whether they are at home or traveling," said Dr. John E. Bischoff, Vice President of NCMEC's Missing Children Division, at the 2023 AATTAP-AIIC National [Symposium](#).

NCMEC's posters will also have larger photos of the missing child and eliminate extraneous details, such as date of birth, when the child's age will suffice.

[SUB-SIDEBAR]

Want even more new-tech news? Check out our [online version](#) of this feature to learn how law enforcement is policing bad apps, using forensic genealogy, employing thermal imaging drones, and more.

FEATURE: FRONT LINES

[It Takes a Village](#)

After her parents were murdered, a missing infant is found safe thanks to Mexico’s media, the public, and AMBER Alert Coordinators—who acted while a conference on protecting children was in play with U.S. DOJ and AATTAP leaders in Monterrey

By Rebecca Sherman

On the morning of August 29, 2023, as AMBER Alert Coordinators from northern Mexico gathered in a Monterrey hotel ballroom for a three-day child protection training conference with top U.S. officials, a real-life child abduction emergency was unfolding behind the scenes.

Hours earlier, and some 230 miles away, 15-month-old Angela Chávez had been taken by armed criminals during a home invasion that left her parents and another adult dead. Angela was discovered missing by her distraught grandmother, who arrived at the home with local authorities after the murders.

Recognizing that the infant was in grave danger, officials immediately notified Yubia Yumiko Ayal Narváez, Regional Coordinator of the Gender-Based Violence Unit of the *Regional de la Fiscalía del Estado de Chihuahua*, or the Chihuahua North Prosecutor’s Office. But like many of her colleagues in Mexico, Narváez was at the conference, organized by the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Overseas Prosecutorial Development, Assistance and Training ([OPDAT](#)) team (based in Mexico City’s U.S. Embassy) and attended by leaders of the AMBER Alert Training & Technical Assistance Program ([AATTAP](#)).

Even while at the event, Narváez discreetly sprang into action, issuing a regional [Alerta Amber](#), Mexico’s version of a U.S. AMBER Alert. Posters of Angela—a cherubic girl with large brown eyes—were circulated on social media, and alerts buzzed on cellphones throughout the region.

Narváez also briefed fellow conference attendee Carlos Morales Rojas on the situation. As *Alerta Amber* National Coordination Liaison, Rojas works with Mexico’s 32 state AMBER Alert Coordinators while based in the Special Prosecutor’s Office for Crimes of Violence Against Women and Human Trafficking for the *Fiscalía General de la República* (FGR), or Office of the Attorney General.

Amid intense and hushed conversations, Narváez and Rojas exchanged information on the abduction during the conference presentations taking place. “Given the seriousness and urgency of the case, we knew we had to work quickly to activate the [national] AMBER Alert, but we also maintained a certain confidentiality of the information,” Rojas recalls.

The effort to rescue baby Angela quickly became a real-time case study that had officials drawing from a deep well of their collective experience and training. “That allowed us to disseminate the alert with urgency, encouraging the media to reach as many people as

possible,” Rojas says.

Several hours after the first alert was issued—and still with no sign of baby Angela—Rojas elevated the alert to the national level, an expanded presence that would no doubt heighten public awareness of the child’s case. Then, once the national AMBER Alert was activated, Rojas and Narváez informed conference attendees about the situation.

Fortuitously, the room was filled with experts on missing and endangered children who collaborated to ensure a swift response in the emerging case. They included: AATTAP Administrator Janell Rasmussen; Yesenia “Jesi” Leon Baron, AATTAP’s Project Coordinator of International and Territorial Programs (including the Southern Border Initiative) and Certification Manager for Child Abduction Response Team (CART) training initiatives; and top officials with the U.S. State Department and U.S. Embassy in Mexico City, including Gigi Scoles, Gabriela Betance, Flor Reyes, and Oswaldo Casillas. “All of them facilitated our work, allowing us to carry it out right there at the conference,” Rojas says.

Media and public response came swiftly. Kidnappers, likely aware the case was receiving national attention, abandoned Angela in a doorway in Ciudad Juarez. A woman spotted the infant and promptly called 911, helping authorities to safely recover her 30 hours after the first AMBER Alert was issued. “Those who took baby Angela definitely felt pressure due to the wide dissemination of the AMBER Alert,” Rojas says. “They knew that many people were looking for her.”

With Angela’s rescue occurring on August 31—the final day of the OPDAT conference—Narváez and Rojas were offered the opportunity to present what had just unfolded as a successful case study, “one that was the result of excellent coordination between Mexican authorities and the public,” Rojas says.

“With the conference focused on sharing AMBER Alert success stories, the case of baby Angela was significant. Training is the most important aspect of our work; that’s why we try to constantly share our experiences.”

AMBER Alerts, along with media reports and the public’s help in searching for a missing child, are powerful tools in the effort to recover endangered missing children, as conference attendees witnessed in real time.

“Without the full support of our citizens and media, our work would essentially be futile,” Rojas says. “We would simply be spectators of what happens.”

[Photos/captions]

1—Since its launch in 2012, Mexico’s *Alerta Amber* has led to the safe recovery of [more than 350 children](#).

2—Carlos Morales Rojas, Mexico’s Alerta Amber National Coordination Liaison, showed faces of missing children—even as he was working a developing case that prompted issuance of a national AMBER Alert.

3—“This is one of many examples of the incredible importance of regional events and cross-border collaboration,” says Yesenia “Jesi” Leon-Baron, AATTAP Project Coordinator for International and Territorial Programs, and Child Abduction Response Team (CART) Training and Certification.

4—Mexican authorities had baby Angela in their caring hands 30 hours after the first Alerta Amber was activated.

5—A view of conference attendees.

FEATURE: FACES

Champion for Change

After years of years of advocacy—and fighting to get her daughter home safely from Mali, West Africa—Dr. Noelle Hunter is turning to research to further highlight the harrowing issue of international parental child abduction

By Jody Garlock

Sitting in a McDonald’s restaurant in Kentucky on New Year’s Day 2011, Dr. Noelle Hunter had a sinking feeling that something was wrong. Her ex-husband was three hours late to their planned meeting spot, where he was to return their 4-year-old daughter, Maayimuna “Muna,” from a holiday visit.

Her maternal instinct proved to be right. She and Muna had become victims of international parental child abduction (IPCA).

It was the start of an ordeal Hunter never could have imagined.

After the FBI was able to confirm that her ex-husband had illegally taken Muna to Mali, West Africa, Hunter thrust herself into a tireless effort to bring her daughter home.

She navigated cultural nuances and complex international law, staged protests in front of embassies in Washington, D.C., pleaded with United Nations members, and worked with a congressional delegation to pressure the Mali government to return Muna. In 2014, she was finally able to bring Muna, almost 7 by that time, home safely. But Hunter never took her foot off the gas.

For the past decade, the mother-turned- advocate has led the [iStand Parent Network](#), which she co-founded in February 2014 to provide resources, support, and advocacy to IPCA survivors—parents and children alike.

With Muna’s help (as an iStand Youth Ambassador), she has been a champion for change to ensure other parents don’t suffer the same fate—and a support for those enduring a similar struggle. Hunter was one of eight parent co-authors of the newly updated multimedia resource, [When Your Child Is Missing: A Family Survival Guide](#).

In September 2023, the iStand Parent Network held its final annual conference and gala as the organization concluded nearly a decade of important and committed work to bring greater awareness and understanding about the problem of IPCA, and support families impacted by it. Hunter—a clinical assistant professor at The University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAH)—is now transitioning from advocacy work to a behind-the-scenes role in research and policy analysis through the university’s new International Child Abduction Prevention and Research Office ([ICAPRO](#)), which she spearheaded. “I’m just hard-wired to fight for children,” she

says. We spoke with her about her journey—and what’s ahead.

How are you and Muna doing, and how have you managed to move forward?

Muna is having the best year of her life. She’s 16 and a 10th-grader. She has a close friend group who shares her quirky humor and love for anime. She’s a naturally gifted visual artist, and just started her first job at a supermarket to earn her own money. Most of all, though, she is a truly gracious young lady—very kind, respectful, gentle—with a very strong sense of self. I marvel because she could justifiably be angry, non-trusting, or generally unhappy after her abduction. But she was never that way. As for me, my bedrock faith has always sustained and empowered me—first to bring Muna home, and then to help other families, and speak truth to power. It’s the simplest and greatest reason I thrive.

Did you imagine the iStand Parent Network would last a decade?

I honestly envisioned iStand enduring in perpetuity; our motto is [the hashtag] #iStandUntilAllChildrenComeHome, so there is grief. But it was time to sunset the organization since its parent-driven engagement had decreased. It had become basically two parts—myself and Jeffery Morehouse [also a *Family Survival Guide* parent-author]—doing the policy work, with a few others helping. But iStand has catalyzed other organizations to form and continue the work, including [iHOPE](#), a Lebanon-based NGO that will take it to the next level of global engagement. And most importantly, we’ve helped empower parents to bring children home. We’ve seen most elements of our 10-point vision statement come to life. So we can rest knowing that iStand has impacted generations.

What has changed with IPCA— good or bad—in the past 10 years?

We’ve seen legislation enacted, such as the Sean and David Goldman International Child Abduction Prevention and Return Act (aka [“the Goldman Act”](#) or ICAPRA) designed to ensure compliance with the [Hague Abduction Convention](#), which set standards of practice between countries to resolve abductions. We’ve seen the U.S. government fully implement an [abduction prevention program](#) that includes a no-fly list for at-risk children—I’m most proud of that. We’ve also seen Congress recognize April as IPCA Awareness Month. But during the pandemic, we lost a great deal of our momentum. We also believe Congress has rested on its laurels after passing ICAPRA, not giving weighty consideration to stronger enforcement of it and other laws. And tragically, there’s been little global reform on this issue. Some nations, such as the U.K., perform relatively well, while others, such as Japan, India, and Brazil, continue to disregard the Hague treaty and international norms concerning abducted children. This is brutal policy work and we’ve been doing it from a parent-advocate prospective, which gets us only so far. It’s time to shift to a data-driven approach.

Tell us about your new research initiative at UAH.

The goal is to begin to create a body of current literature in research on IPCA. Existing research is almost 20 years old and the information is woefully out of date. We want data to

illustrate the scope of the problem, the gaps in federal and international responses. We want to take what we learn from the initial research to make policy recommendations to Congress. This all came about in a beautiful way. I teach classes at UAH, and in one of them we made a IPCA think tank. Students did such a wonderful job that I asked permission to develop it into an office concept, which took a year. Our 10th point of vision with iStand was to establish an independent entity that would guide research and engagement, so this is really an evolution of that.

What do you want law enforcement to know about IPCA cases?

No. 1, it is not a civil matter. The response tends to be, “We can’t do anything unless you get a court order,” and a court order is by definition a civil matter. But a parent is not required to have a court order to report their child missing. [Federal law](#) requires the child to be immediately entered into the NCIC database. No. 2, there are other laws that require law enforcement to fulfill first-responder duties without waiting for a court order. And No. 3, consider a child to be at risk when they’ve been taken internationally, regardless of if he or she is with a parent.

What was it like being one of the parent-authors of the updated *When Your Child Is Missing: Family Survival Guide*?

Eye-opening and transformative. I honestly had only thought about international abductions and didn’t see the number of similarities with domestic ones. I was also truly humbled by the grace of my co-authors whose children were murdered. What magnificent valor to continue to help others after the unimaginable. I was honored to be in their company and work with them on this project—which I already know is helping people: I received a call from a parent who was going down the checklist. Our hope is for it to be a widely known go-to source—for law enforcement, attorneys, social services, child and victim advocates, and others—as the first step to empower parents on this awful journey.

What’s next for you?

Besides the work I plan to do with the new International Child Abduction Prevention and Research Office, it’s time for me to live a little. Time to rest. I haven’t stopped since 2011 when my daughter was taken. It’s time to slow down and enjoy life knowing I’ve been a good soldier. And perhaps it’s time to start writing a book of this amazing story that doesn’t seem to have an end.

[Display quote]

“We fought a long time to make the point that a parental child abduction is a crime.”
– Dr. Noelle Hunter

[Photos/captions]

1—"There are far too many parents unaware that it can happen—until it happens," says Dr. Noelle Hunter, shown with daughter Maayimuna "Muna."

2— Dr. Noelle Hunter (at far right) walks with fellow advocates for the iStand Parent Network in Washington, D.C.

3— In 2014, Hunter, her daughter Maayimuna "Muna," and a family friend visited U.S. Senator Mitch McConnell. McConnell was part of the Kentucky delegation that Hunter worked with to secure Muna's safe return.

4— In May 2023, Dr. Noelle Hunter spoke before the U.S. House Foreign Affairs subcommittee hearing "Bring Abducted Children Home," [televised](#) on C-SPAN.

5— Hear Dr. Hunter tell her story and share advice for the newly updated [When Your Child Is Missing: A Family Survival Guide](#) by visiting [familysurvival.amberadvocate.org/ video-library/](http://familysurvival.amberadvocate.org/video-library/) and clicking on "Dr. Noelle Hunter."

FACES FEATURE: SIDEBAR

IPCA Myth Busters

Dr. Noelle Hunter dispels three common myths surrounding international parental child abduction (IPCA) cases

Myth: It's feuding parents, not criminal action, that harms children and families.

Reality: Local law enforcement initially brushed off Hunter's abduction claim, assuming she and her ex-husband had simply had a fight that would resolve itself. "I remember the exact words from them: 'Well, I guess he just got tired of dealing with you and took her.'" She urges law enforcement to take parental child abduction seriously and treat it as the criminal matter it is.

Myth: Parents can just go get their child.

Reality: To get her daughter home safely, it took Hunter nearly three years of nonstop work, which involved developing a network of attorneys in both the U.S. and abroad. Despite court rulings in her favor, her ex-husband would file appeals to delay the process. Fortunately for Hunter, Muna's return happened shortly before she turned 7—the age when a mother's custodial rights greatly decrease in Mali. Hunter also contends that governments have been lax in enforcing the Hague Abduction Convention and holding non-compliant countries accountable.

Myth: The child is fine because he/she is with the other parent.

Reality: Even if there's no physical *Myth:* harm, abducted children who have their life uprooted and are forced to adapt to a different culture takes an emotional toll, Hunter says. "My daughter was in a foreign country—she didn't know anyone."

NEWS BRIEFS: UNITED STATES

[NCMEC: How to spot fake missing child posters](#)

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) warns about a new clickbait scam: bogus missing child posters. Learn how to recognize a fake by looking for these red flags: The poster doesn't come from NCMEC, an official law enforcement agency, or credible news source; it may contain misspellings, syntax errors, or improperly used words; and it doesn't note how you can take appropriate action.

[Florida Missing Children's Day brings healing](#)

The 25th Florida Missing Children's Day event honored citizens, law enforcement officers, and K-9 teams for their exemplary efforts investigating missing persons, rescuing missing children, and preventing abductions. The September 11 ceremony in Tallahassee included a moment of remembrance for all the children who vanish each year. One of them was 14-year-old Demiah Appling, reported missing from Dixie County in October 2022. Her body was found two months later in neighboring Gilchrist County. Her uncle, David Appling, told Tallahassee's WCTV that the ceremony was a moment of healing: "The people here, they understand. And they know, they explained to us it is OK to be sad, it's OK to cry and show your emotions and not be ashamed of it."

[59 missing children rescued during FBI sting](#)

More than 200 sex trafficking victims, including 59 missing children, were rescued by the FBI during a coordinated two-week campaign last summer that involved federal, state, and local agencies across the country, working in partnership with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. "Operation Cross Country," now in its 13th year, also led to the identification or arrest of 126 suspects of child sexual exploitation and human trafficking offenses; 68 suspects of trafficking were also identified and arrested.

[Sheriff's Office K-9 Unit nabs first in manhunt trials](#)

The Santa Rosa County, Florida, Sheriff's Office K-9 Bloodhounds Unit and K-9 "Zinc" took top honors this past September at the 2023 Southeastern States Manhunt Trials, Single Leash Division. The field trials, which are hosted by the Escambia County Road Prison, simulate conditions that law enforcement K-9 teams experience when searching for a suspect or lost child. The county's K-9 Unit is comprised of 17 highly trained canines supervised by Sergeants Chrystal Bozard and Robert Lenzo.

NEWS BRIEFS: INTERNATIONAL

[DNA test helps U.S. man, stolen at birth, reunite with mother in Chile after 42 years](#)

General Augusto Pinochet's 17-year reign of terror resulted in tens of thousands of Chileans killed, tortured, and imprisoned—and an estimated 20,000 newborns were stolen and put up for adoption abroad. Pinochet was deposed in 1990, but the thousands of families whose babies were illegally taken still feel the pain. To help them and their missing children find answers, the Chilean nonprofit group *Nos Buscamos* has partnered with online genealogy platform MyHeritage to provide free at-home DNA testing kits for Chilean adoptees and victims of child trafficking. The effort is paying off: One American man has been given his birthright back. In late summer 2023, *Nos Buscamos* helped Jimmy Lippert Thyden [locate](#) his biological mother in Chile after 42 years. Thyden's DNA test matched him to a first cousin who connected him with his birth mother, Maria Angelica Gonzalez. [Thyden](#) soon traveled to Chile with his family to meet her. The NGO has orchestrated over 450 such reunions between adoptees and their birth families in the last decade.

[Brazilian government signs deal with Meta to track down missing children](#)

Digital powerhouse Meta has joined forces with Brazil's Ministry of Justice and Public Security to help locate missing children and adolescents up to age 18. In an agreement signed on the International Day of Missing Persons this past August, two of Meta's platforms—Facebook and Instagram—have begun issuing emergency alerts for Brazil's missing children. Emily Vacher, Meta's Global Director of Responsibility and Safety, says the technology has been used in 30 countries since 1990 and resulted in locating more than 1,200 children. Meta hopes to expand the program to other platforms, including WhatsApp and Threads.

[American Samoa and Guam delegates propose legislation to increase jail time for traffickers](#)

United States congressional delegates High Chief Uifa'atali Aumua Amata Coleman Radewagen of American Samoa and James Moylan of the District of Guam are co-sponsors of a [bill](#) to raise mandatory minimum jail time from 15 to 25 years for convicted child traffickers. The bill, known as the Combating Human-Trafficking of Innocent Lives Daily (C.H.I.L.D.) Act of 2023, also requires uniform sentences for traffickers who exploit victims under the age of 18. The [toughened law](#) is expected to send a strong message to those who engage in child sex trafficking. "Human trafficking is one of the greatest crimes imaginable, yet it is a sad reality that we must defeat," said Congresswoman Radewagen. "Thank you to Congressman Moylan for his leadership on this important issue as we fight for the lives and futures of vulnerable children." Representatives Don Davis of North Carolina, Diana Harshbarger of Tennessee, and Don Bacon of Nebraska also co-sponsored the bill, which was introduced last September.

SPOTLIGHT: INDIAN COUNTRY

Strength in Numbers

Dozens of AATTAP/AIIC Technology Toolkits now in the hands of Minnesota and Wisconsin Tribes

By Denise Gee Peacock

The AMBER Alert Training & Technical Assistance Program’s AMBER Alert in Indian Country (AIIC) team recently provided [Technology Toolkits](#) to nearly two dozen Tribal nations in Minnesota and Wisconsin. Each durable toolkit—containing a rugged laptop, webcam, digital camera, scanner, and hotspot device with six free months of WiFi—can help Tribes work more quickly and efficiently during missing child cases.

Funding for the toolkits, offered to any federally recognized Tribe, is provided by the U.S. Department of Justice and [Ashlynn Mike AMBER Alert in Indian Country Act of 2018](#).

In [Minnesota](#), the toolkits presentation occurred during a quarterly meeting with leaders from state Tribal law enforcement as well as the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension (BCA) and Minnesota Department of Public Safety (DPS). The event was held at the Cedar Lakes Casino and Hotel, owned by the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe.

In [Wisconsin](#), the toolkits were provided during the quarterly Native American Drug and Gang Initiative Task Force Advisory Board meeting at the Oneida Nation Police headquarters in Oneida.

[Photos/captions]

1–In Wisconsin, Oneida Nation Police Lieutenant Justine Wheelock shows off her agency’s toolkit before the meeting.

2–Wisconsin meeting attendees gather for a photo.

3–In Minnesota, Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe Holistic Health Spiritual Care Coordinator Gary Charwood (above) blessed the event. “We are relatives. We all do the work to take care of one another.”

4–Minnesota meeting participants are shown at left.