‘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
IN THIS ISSUE

03
COVER STORY: ‘One Team, One Fight’
Read highlights of the 2024 AMBER Alert & AMBER Alert in Indian Country Symposium in New Orleans.

09
FRONT LINES: Wheels of Justice
The successful search for a 9-year-old girl in Upstate New York opened AMBER Alert Coordinators to scrutiny.

14
FACES: A Shining Light

17
NEWS BRIEFS: U.S., Indian Country & International
Get up to speed on the latest AMBER Alert-related news that will inform and inspire your child protection work.

20
COURSES OF ACTION: At Your Service
Access to all of AATTAP's trusted trainings and helpful resources is as close as your smartphone camera.

LET'S CONNECT
AMBER Alert Training & Technical Assistance Program (AATTAP)
Facebook.com/amberadvocate
AMBER Alert in Indian Country (AIIC)
Facebook.com/amberalertic
AATTAP & AIIC
Bit.ly/AATTAP-AIIC-Linkedin
AMBERAdvocate.org
AMBER-IC.org

EDITORS’ NOTES

In the print edition, words and phrases in bold purple denote hyperlinks for content sources and additional details. To interact with hyperlinks, visit AMBERAdvocate.org to download a PDF of current and past issues.

Have a story idea for us? We’d love to hear from you. Email askamber@fvtc.edu.

Bonnie Ferenbach
Executive Editor

Denise Gee Peacock
Managing Editor, Designer

Jody Garlock
Rebecca Sherman
Contributing Editors

Whitecap Interactive
Website Design
whitecap.io

Janell Rasmussen
Administrator

AMBER Alert Training & Technical Assistance Program information:
AMBERAdvocate.org
askamber@fvtc.edu
877-71-AMBER (877-712-6237)

This publication was prepared under Cooperative Agreement 15PJDP-23-GK-00776-MECP from the United States Department of Justice (DOJ), Office of Justice Programs (OJP). Points of view or opinions expressed in this issue are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the OJP or the DOJ.
Hundreds of state and regional AMBER Alert Coordinators, Missing Person Clearinghouse Managers, public alerting/emergency management experts, Tribal law enforcement officers, 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 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...
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.

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 participated in hundreds of ours.
of Minnesota “helped open the eyes and 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 have carried forward since the 1&-7&VFUHDWLRQ

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.*

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

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.

PHOTOS: AATTAP STAFF AND KIMBER BIGGS

Left: 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.

Opposite page: AATTAP-NCJTC Instructor/retired FBI Special Agent David Fallon leads a workshop on family member abductions.
her family’s Arizona home—and never seen again. Biggs ZDVHUVROGZKHQWKDW trauma took place, but she has spent 25 years advocating on her sister’s behalf. She now works as an Associate for WKH$$77$31&-7&

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 KDYLQDJQD$D$LUDWWhLM$PH of her sister’s disappearance.

“And instead of looking at other suspects—LQFOXGLQJDUHLVWHUHVGVHRQGHURQRX VWHUHWWKH14$D$WHGRQP$GDGDQGWHKDPL$K$D$W$DV$DKX$HVHWF$D$NFIR$U$W$K$HD$VH 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 WKDWHVHLQJDVLJQL4FDQW suspect in the case makes it IHHOOLHV$PHWHKLQ$LVQDOD9 happening.”

On the Symposium’s second day, Pamela Foster shared her powerful story. Foster is the mother of the late 11-year-old Ashlynne Mike, whose May 2016 abduction and PUXGHRQW$K$HIDYDMR1D$WLRQ LQ1H20H(LFROHGW)$RVWHU 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 Ashlynne 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 DIWHUOHUQLQJW$K$D$W$W$K$H$1DYD$MR1D$WLRQW$K$H$ 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 FUHDWHGDPDMRUGHODLQ4QGLQ$5V$KOQQH

Above, from left: Sibling-survivor Kimber Biggs photographed her AMBER Alert lapel pin and two gifts from Ashlynne’s mother, Pamela Foster: a memorial button and a pair of earrings with wording from the Ashlynne Mike AMBER Alert in Indian Country Act of 2018. At right: 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.
“Within weeks, I started petitions to bring the AMBER Alert to Indian Country,” she said. “I called it the AMBER Alert to 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 Ashlynne Mike AMBER Alert in Indian Country Act was signed into law—and ultimately lead 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 Ashlynne—and all missing children,” Rasmussen said. “Pamela’s tireless work has changed the way we respond to missing children.” AMBER Alert Plan, and many other Tribal nations are working with state and regional partners to ensure that what happened to Ashlynne 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.

“With the support of late U.S. Senator John McCain and Representative Andy Biggs, both of Arizona, by 2018, the Ashlynne Mike AMBER Alert in Indian Country Act was signed into law—and ultimately lead 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 Ashlynne—and all missing children,” Rasmussen said. “Pamela’s tireless work has changed the way we respond to missing children.” AMBER Alert Plan, and many other Tribal nations are working with state and regional partners to ensure that what happened to Ashlynne 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.

At the conclusion of the Symposium, Rasmussen reminded attendees of what family members of 2018 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.”
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, who was abducted and murdered on the Navajo Nation in New Mexico when she was 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.

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.”
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 cries of the search teams. “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.

Saturday, September 30, 2023, was a beautiful autumn day in the foothills of Moreau Lake State Park. 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 had nothing to go by or give the public.” Adds Assistant AMBER Alert Coordinator Victoria Martuscello: “It was like she vanished into thin air.”
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 people came out to support the search. Authorities used a variety of tools to find Charlotte, including drones and underwater search teams.

As word of Charlotte’s disappearance circulated, WKH6HQD5RPHLQ*UHHQ4HOG UHFLY HGDVWHDG|SRZWIUD|FURP well-wishers—known and unknown— ZKGURSSFGRHVHDJHRIVXSSRUW While the distraught family remained at the park, their house was under police VXYLHQQDHFRWKLQJAVHPGHQXXVXDD 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 5HVSRQV7HDPDKG YUL4HGWKDW5RVV cellular device was in the vicinity of the park when Charlotte disappeared, so authorities obtained search warrants.

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.
Above: Craig N. Ross Jr. was booked at the Saratoga County jail shortly after tactical teams found Charlotte in his camper.

Right: NYSP Senior Investigator and AMBER Alert Coordinator Erika Hock (center) was among the relieved authorities at the command center during Charlotte’s safe recovery.

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

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 likely to be. The goal is to provide the public with information that can help, rather than Strategic, targeted alerting helps prevent people from becoming desensitized 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 those alerts.”
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. 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.

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.”
Julene 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 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 goals, as follows.
• Identify, report, and respond to cases of missing and murdered Indigenous people (MMIP) and human trafficking.
• Develop legislative and administrative goals, as follows.
• Track and report data on MMIP and human

With May designated as

A Shining Light

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

Consider issues related to the hiring and

A Shining Light

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

Consider issues related to the hiring and

A Shining Light

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

Consider issues related to the hiring and

A Shining Light

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

Consider issues related to the hiring and

A Shining Light

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

Consider issues related to the hiring and

A Shining Light

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

Consider issues related to the hiring and
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 1RWQYLVLEOH$FWVXFKOperation Lady Justice. Many weeks we met multiple times and brought in subject-matter experts to answer questions. I also gave in-person [congressional] testimony in D.C. as an expert on missing children, and traveled to Minnesota and Montana for public testimony. We were organized into subcommittees based on our experience. I was co-chair of Subcommittee Two, which which focused on MMIP data. And on Subcommittee Four, we looked at coordinating resources, criminal jurisdiction, prosecution, and information sharing—for instance, understanding how the 1&$&>1DWLROD&O&ULPHQIRUPDLRO&HQWHU@ database is aggregated, and what shortfalls it presents.

How does the way data is collected present a problem?

“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?

Growing up I was taught that term was.

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

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 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.

Continues next page >>
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 needed 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.”

“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

How have you approached the complexities of working with different Tribes?
Every Tribe needs its own voice to be heard. The best way to address our Tribal partners’ needs is to ask them. We’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 is on taking the table as advisors, equals, and subject-matter experts. Together, we can really address their needs.

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. “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.”

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

United States

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.

J ohn Walsh partners with NCMEC, returns to TV

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 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.”

GPS bracelet helps Florida deputies find child

When 9-year-old child with autism was reported missing in November, Hillsborough County deputies in Tampa, Florida, were notified. With weather conditions worsening, deputies could not use an air unit to help search for the child, but the 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.
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 60RZDUDHRLNQJZLWJKWKH%ODFNIHWH7ULEHWRUHDWHD1SGWDVDRM7LEOHPHHEUW V6KDWDFQEHFRP5UDHGLWKKXQLGQW4HGKXPQHPDQVLRQ0RUVHWKQVHVWRI KXPDQHPDLOQVDUHRXQGLQWKH86DFKHZDUDRZDTHDXDUHOWHUHPDLOQVQLGHQWL4HG DFFRUGLQJWRWKH%XUHDXR1-XVWLFH6WDLWLFWLFWLQ1HDUORUHRWRIPLVLWQLQ0GLJHQRXV ZRPHQDQGLJUVZUH4OHGLQDORQHZPQDQVRLVRKRSKISVXQODHQWVHQV ETHIRXQGODLYHEXWKXNHQNZVWKDWH612Q5G1LGHQWLI\KHUIULHGV 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 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 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 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.
New photo technology helps find missing kids
A novel use of technology is helping to locate missing children around the world. In Kenya, Face Age Progression (FAP) technology, which utilizes Artificial Intelligence (AI) to create photos of children, has been instrumental in reuniting missing children with their families. For example, 9-year-old Phillista Waithera, who disappeared in Nairobi in 2021, was reunited with her immediate family in 2023 using FAP technology. In China, 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. In 2023, more than 1,000 photos have been restored, 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
Ukrainian 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. Nonprofit groups and 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.”
COURSES OF ACTION

Finding what you need is a snap.

AATTAP courses
Indian Country (AIIC) courses
AMBER Alert resources

Trusted, timely, & actionable information—at your fingertips.
Simply focus your smartphone camera on these QR codes to access the latest training & networking opportunities for child protection professionals.

AIIC website
Find AMBER Alert partners
Family Survival Guide

AMBERAlert®
TRAINING & Technical Assistance PROGRAM
AMBERAdvocate.org