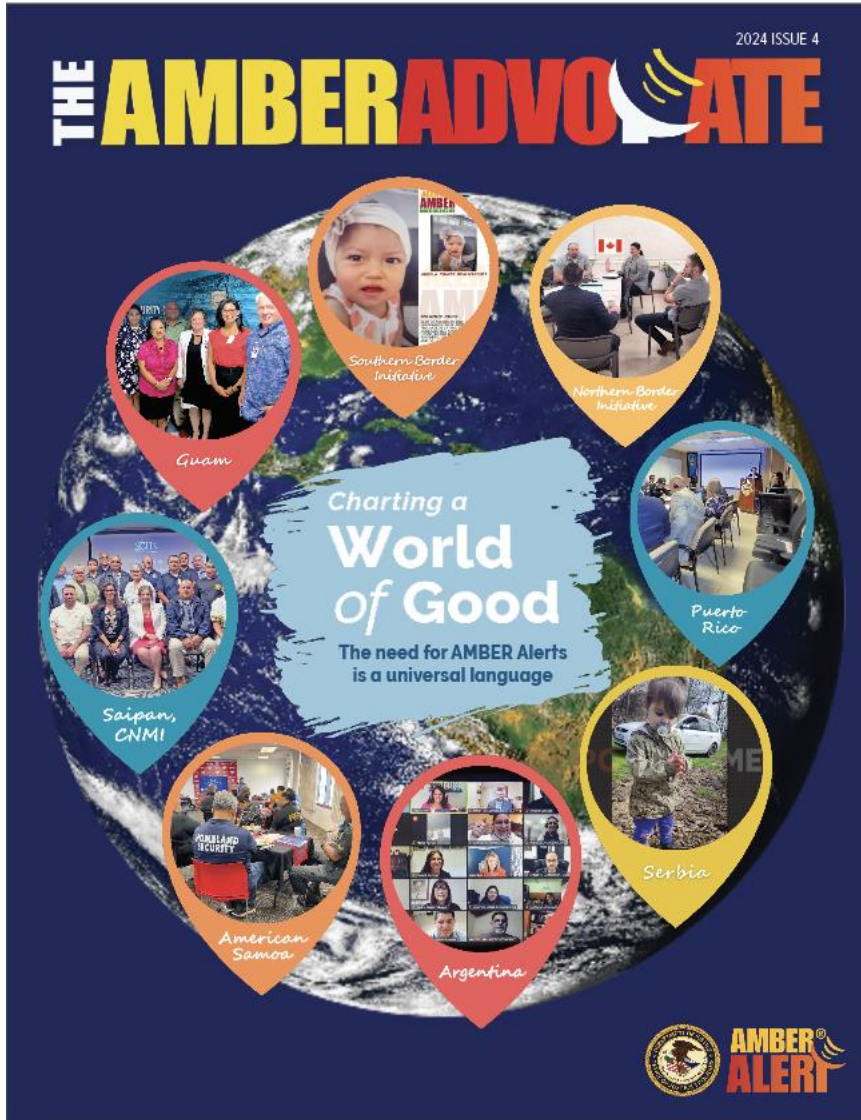


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# AMBER ADVOCATE 60



The AMBER Advocate, 2024 Issue 4

## Charting a World of Good

The need for AMBER Alerts is a universal language

[Photos]

1—Blue cover showing Earth to represent global mission, with eight small round photos of people and children from different countries forming a circle around the Earth photo. Captions

for photos read, clockwise from top: Southern Border Initiative; Northern Border Initiative; Puerto Rico; Serbia, Argentina; American Samoa; Saipan, CNMI; Guam.

## COVER STORY

### A World of Good

More than 236 million citizens in U.S. territories and other countries benefit from AATTAP collaboration. The need for AMBER Alerts is a universal language.

By Denise Gee Peacock

The United States' 14 territories—three in the Caribbean, 11 in the Pacific—play a key role in ensuring our collective national security. In turn, the U.S. ensures each homeland has the security it needs to protect its own—especially its children. That's because the need for AMBER Alerts resonates in every language.

In the past 30 years, AMBER Alert programs have helped law enforcement safely recover 1,200 missing children. Those successes—and lessons learned from not having plans and resources in place to quickly mobilize when a child goes missing—have prompted other countries to seek guidance from the AMBER Alert Training & Technical Assistance Program (AATTAP).

As a U.S. Department of Justice initiative, the AATTAP—part of the National Criminal Justice Training Center of Fox Valley Technical College—provides free training and technical assistance to U.S. territories, Indian Country, and other countries with Department of Justice (DOJ) funding. Trainings improve law enforcement's response to cases of endangered missing and abducted children. They also address endangerment dynamics that often are not well understood: high-risk victims, children in crisis, and the commercial sexual exploitation of youth.

Since all U.S. [territories](#) are islands, careful consideration of weather is always in play, with hurricanes and typhoons threatening both travel and infrastructure.

AATTAP's work with each territory includes first conducting high-level needs assessment meetings to learn and understand the important considerations unique to each territory's cultural, geographic, and technological needs and challenges—to ensure these dynamics are addressed in training and resource efforts. AATTAP's Child Abduction Response Team (CART) training is also delivered to key partners who will be part of their comprehensive response.

“Each territory's capabilities and needs can be very different, so we spend the bulk of our time initially listening and learning about the issues they face,” says AATTAP Administrator Janell Rasmussen. “Puerto Rico, for instance, has an AMBER Alert Coordinator and AMBER Alert system in operation. But that's currently not the case in American Samoa, Guam, or the U.S. Virgin Islands. They're all at very different places in terms of how they're responding to cases involving missing children.

“Geographically some of the islands are closer to other countries than they are to us, so these issues have to be considered before we prepare training plans for them,” Rasmussen explains. “Our work has to be developed to address the specific problems they face—whether it’s child sex trafficking or a lack of resources, such as high-speed Internet access.” Many territories, for instance, do not have access to Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEAs) or the Internet Public Alert & Warning System (IPAWS). They also lack road signs for public alerting. Additionally, “their children are often taken to a different country, which adds a whole new layer of complexity for collaboration and contact expectations,” Rasmussen explains. Knowing this, AATTAP leaders and subject matter experts have flown tens of thousands of miles to ensure U.S. territories’ needs can be met. “It’s important they know we offer the same level of training and technical assistance as we do in the States.”

Here are some of the regions where AATTAP partnerships are helping save lives.

### **American Samoa, Guam, and the Northern Mariana Islands**

From the U.S. mainland, travel to American Samoa, Guam, or the Northern Mariana Islands in the south-central Pacific Ocean requires nearly 24 hours of flying time. American Samoa, for instance—the only inhabited territory south of the Equator—is 2,200 miles from Hawaii to the northeast, and 1,600 miles from New Zealand to the southwest.

For nearly two years, the federal government has been working to uphold National Defense Authorization Act provisions that ensure U.S. territories have the training and technical assistance needed to protect their citizens and children. This includes challenges related to integrating and facilitating AMBER Alert programs.

In February of this year, the team conducted two days of needs-assessment meetings in Pago Pago, American Samoa. Then in July, the team visited Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands to do the same.

As is the case on the U.S. mainland, each needs-assessment meeting involves facilitated discussions about law enforcement procedures, the territory’s needs for fully and quickly investigating missing child incidents, their emergency messaging capabilities, and ultimately what AATTAP training and technical assistance they would like to have.

Reception to the visits was warm and enthusiastic. Often present were U.S. congressional delegates, local and federal law enforcement and telecommunicators, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to child protection.

“Our partners are appreciative that we’re willing to go to great lengths to work with them where they live,” says AATTAP Project Coordinator Yesenia “Jesi” Leon-Baron, who manages territorial, international, and Southern/Northern Border Initiatives. “Doing so helps us see what their challenges are in safely recovering endangered and missing children.”

This support is a lifeline to the islands. As Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) Department of Public Safety Commissioner Anthony Macaranas told the Saipan Tribune, “One of our biggest challenges is that we’re far away from the United States mainland.” Thus, creating or strengthening AMBER Alert plans will help the CNMI build relationships with key members of law enforcement “and help us progressively move forward,” he said.

One [case](#) in the Northern Marianas that people would like to see resolved involves missing elementary-school-age sisters Maleina and Faloma Q. Luhk, who mysteriously disappeared while waiting for a school bus near their home in May 2011.

“All of these things we’re getting [from the AATTAP and others] are to prepare us, and the long-term plan is to finally sit down and come up with a strategic plan” on implementing AMBER Alerts, Macaranas said. “It involves a lot of manpower, data, and of course funding ... but in the end, we’re going to have this program here.”

Another challenge for the U.S. territories is human trafficking.

Trafficking “is one of the greatest crimes imaginable,” said High Chief Uifa’atali Aumua Amata Coleman Radewagen of American Samoa. To address that, James Moylan of Guam co-sponsored the Combating Human-Trafficking of Innocent Lives Daily (C.H.I.L.D.) Act of 2023, which raises convicted child traffickers’ mandatory minimum jail time from 15 to 25 years.

“Before we left American Samoa, the Governor’s Office presented each of us with a framed ‘warrior’s weapon’—calling us warriors for the missing and abducted children in the territory,” Leon-Baron says.

### **Puerto Rico**

Puerto Rico is the only U.S. territory with an AMBER Alert plan and program coordinator fully in place at the time of this reporting. Their ongoing goal is to continually refine their existing plan and provide a coordinated and sustainable law enforcement response.

AATTAP has been involved in ongoing assistance with Puerto Rico since holding the first in-person training session there in January 2023. Team members delivered the Child Abduction Response Team (CART) training, along with Rescue, Recovery, and Reunification field-training exercises for CART members and other law enforcement in Puerto Rico.

In May 2024, the AATTAP team returned for a needs assessment visit to discuss Puerto Rico’s ongoing challenges, emerging trends, and the training and technical assistance needed to bolster response readiness.

Puerto Rico’s law enforcement leaders intend to continue CART training, Leon-Baron says. They also plan to participate in such courses as AMBER Alert Activation Best Practices

(AAABP), Initial Response Strategies & Tactics When Responding to Missing Children Incidents (IRST), and Search and Canvass Operations in Child Abductions (SCOCA).

### **Southern Border Initiative (Mexico) and Northern Border Initiative (Canada)**

AATTAP's well-established **Southern Border Initiative** (SBI) is focused on building preparedness for effective response to cases of endangered missing and abducted children in Mexico and the U.S. through cross-border collaboration and planning. Meetings AATTAP has held with federal and state partners in the last two years have underscored the impact of this type of collaboration.

The most recent meeting—held August 1 in Chula Vista, California (across the border from Tijuana, **Mexico**)—drew more than 100 law enforcement and NGO members who rely on cross-border collaboration to bring missing children safely home. AATTAP piloted a full-day version of its Cross-Border Abduction training, with some participants leaving their homes at 2 a.m. to attend, Leon-Baron says.

AATTAP Associate David Camacho recalled the impact of the event: “We were thankful to have them all there; they had amazing questions, and we reviewed them carefully.”

One conversation “was tough to even consider,” Leon-Baron says. “Some shared with us that in Tijuana, there’s a movement to allow a child of age 9 to consent to sex.”

This is one of many cultural issues that need to be addressed, Leon-Baron says. “We know their laws and judicial processes do not mirror ours. But what does align is our shared commitment to collaboration and cooperation. Thankfully state and federal U.S. and Mexico law enforcement, are developing critically important working relationships.”

The power of relationship-building was especially apparent at an Alerta AMBER Regional Conference in Monterrey, Mexico, hosted by the DOJ's Overseas Proprietary Development Assistance and Training Section (OPDAT) in late August 2023.

As the three-day conference began, a 1-year-old girl, Angela, was abducted August 28 after her parents were murdered during an invasion of their Ciudad Juarez home.

Yubia Yumiko Ayala Narvaez, Regional Coordinator of the Gender-Based Violence Unit/Chihuahua North Prosecutor's Office, and Mexico's National AMBER Alert Coordinator, Carlos Morales Rojas, were at the conference. They worked together to release national and state alerts for Angela.

Media and public response to both alerts came swiftly. By the next day, the kidnapers, likely aware the case was receiving national attention, abandoned Angela in a Ciudad Juarez doorway. A woman found the infant and immediately called 911. And less than 30 hours after the issuance of the state AMBER Alert, the child was safely recovered.



“Narvaez and Rojas met for the first time as they arrived for the conference. This was just one of so many examples of how incredibly important regional events like this are to the ongoing work to build preparedness for effective response to cases of endangered missing and abducted children—in Mexico and the U.S.—through cross-border planning,” Leon-Baron says.

“While increasing coordination and collaboration was our goal, we didn’t expect to see results so quickly, in real time, right in front of us,” says Gigi Scoles, OPDAT Resident Legal Advisor to Mexico.

AATTAP’s **Northern Border Initiative** (NBI) also relies heavily on collaboration between Canadian provinces’ child protection officials and U.S. counterparts. Like Mexico, Canada also has Tribal components. “But the dynamics are different,” Leon-Baron explains. The professionals’ work often involves family abductions of children, either taken into or out of one country to another.

AATTAP visits have included Canadian AMBER Alert Coordinators and members of both the U.S. Customs & Border Patrol, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and Tribal law enforcement (such as the St. Regis Mohawk Police Department). And the next NBI event—a focus group meeting—was held this September in Bonners Ferry, Idaho.

### **Serbia and Argentina**

One of AATTAP’s highest-profile international endeavors was working with officials from the Bureau of Narcotics and International Law Enforcement (INL) and the Republic of Serbia to help that country launch its AMBER Alert-style program “Pronadji Me” (“Find Me”) in June 2023. The AATTAP-INL-New York-Virginia team also advised Bosnia-Herzegovina on their AMBER Alert-style plan.

The meeting, held at the U.S. State Department in Washington, D.C., also featured insight from Virginia and New York child protection officers. Virginia State Police AMBER Alert Coordinators Sergeant Connie Brooks and Lieutenant Robbie Goodrich outlined how their state AMBER Alert activations are decided and disseminated. Additionally, New York State Police AMBER Alert Coordinator Erika Hock, New York State Missing Persons Clearinghouse (NYSMPC) Manager Cindy Neff, and NYSMPC Investigative Supervisor Timothy Williams participated virtually to discuss their state’s AMBER Alert program requirements.

In March 2024—nine months after the U.S. meeting—Serbia activated its first “Find Me” Alert after a 2-year-old girl [Dana Ilic](#) disappeared in the town of Bor. Television and radio stations interrupted their programs to share details about Dana, including the time and place of her disappearance, and her clothes and age. Citizens also received SMS (short message service) alerts.

“Though Serbia’s first AMBER Alert sadly did not result in Dana’s safe return, the country is learning from the alert’s implementation, which will help other children who go missing,” Rasmussen says.

Although in-person meetings are always preferred, virtual meetings do have their advantages. Consider AATTAP’s one-day CART Virtual Instructor-Led Training with **Argentina**—an event in which AATTAP collaborated with the International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children.

“The response was overwhelming,” Leon-Baron says. “We had hundreds on our call, with many more wanting to join.” AATTAP’s next trainings with Argentina were in October.

### **Dominican Republic, U.S. Virgin Islands, and beyond**

Meetings with child protection and government officials in the **Dominican Republic** and **U.S. Virgin Islands** have been delayed due to hurricanes, but the AATTAP planned to visit this fall.

“Our work is really just beginning,” Rasmussen says. “Now that we’ve assessed the territories’ needs, we plan to go back and help them get their AMBER Alert programs where they need to be. There is a lot of training ahead—focusing on on investigative strategies, first responders, search and rescue teams—and all of it will be informed by the geographical and cultural considerations that we have seen firsthand.”

*Rebecca Sherman contributed to this report.*

### **[Display text]**

The U.S. territories’ remoteness, and steady flow of port travelers, leaves them vulnerable to those who would harm their children.

### **[Display text]**

“Other countries are very interested in our CART training,” Leon-Baron says. “No place else in the world takes such a multi-jurisdictional, multiagency approach to finding missing children. Law enforcement leaders want to see that happen for their own communities.”

### **[Photos/captions]**

- 1—Photo of close-up of hands from various people holding a round object that resembles a small globe
- 2—Photo of a round sculpture-like sign that reads “Welcome to Guam U.S.A.”
- 3—Small photo of a United States of America flag
- 4—Small photo of an American Samoa (AS) flag
- 5—Small photo of an Argentina flag
- 6—Small photo of a Bosnia flag
- 7—Small photo of a Canada flag
- 8—Small photo of a Dominican Republic flag
- 9—Small photo of Guam flag
- 10—Small photo of a Mexico flag

- 11—Photo of two women standing near the U.S. capitol. Caption for photo reads: AATTAP Administrator Janell Rasmussen (left) and Project Coordinator Yesenia “Jesi” Leon-Baron are shown before a meeting with U.S. territory delegates in Washington, D.C.
- 12—Small photo of a Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) flag
- 13—Small photo of a Puerto Rico flag
- 14—Small photo of a Serbia flag
- 15—Small photo of U.S. Virgin Islands flag
- 16—Photo of an instructor speaking to people sitting in a classroom setting. Caption for photo reads: During a visit to American Samoa, Project Coordinator Derek VanLuchene, who manages AATTAP’s Child Abduction Response Team (CART) training initiatives, talks with a packed room of participants.
- 17—Photo showing the seal of American Samoa near a portion of a U.S. flag. Caption for photo reads: During a visit to American Samoa, Project Coordinator Derek VanLuchene, who manages AATTAP’s Child Abduction Response Team (CART) training initiatives, talks with a packed room of participants.
- 18—Photo of a woman sitting at a table, with other people behind her, listening in a classroom setting. Caption for photo reads: During a visit to American Samoa, Project Coordinator Derek VanLuchene, who manages AATTAP’s Child Abduction Response Team (CART) training initiatives, talks with a packed room of participants.
- 19—Photo of two men writing on a whiteboard in a classroom setting. Caption for photo reads: Left: In the Northern Mariana Islands, an AATTAP workshop drew Customs and Border Protection members.
- 20—Photo showing a close-up of an AMBER Alert lapel pin and a gold coin with Guam logo and saying Governor of Guam
- 21—Photo of a group of people standing in front of Homeland Security signage. Caption for photo reads: Below: In Guam, the AATTAP team stands with the U.S. territory’s Homeland Security Director Esther Aguigi (third from left), Governor Lourdes Leon Guerrero (fourth from left), and Lieutenant Governor Josh Tenorio (back).
- 22—Small photo of a United States of America flag
- 23—Small photo of an American Samoa (AS) flag
- 24—Small photo of an Argentina flag
- 25—Small photo of a Bosnia flag
- 26—Photo of people sitting at a table listening to a speaker behind a podium. Caption for photo reads: Left: AATTAP Administrator Janell Rasmussen talks with law enforcement leaders in Puerto Rico.
- 27—Photo of a police building in Puerto Rico showing “policia” spelled out on a column
- 28—Photo of a woman standing behind a microphone. Caption for photo reads: Below right: Jenniffer González-Colón, the 20th Resident Commissioner of Puerto Rico, notes her support for AATTAP collaboration.
- 29—Small photo of a Canada flag
- 30—Small photo of a Dominican Republic flag
- 31—Small photo of Guam flag
- 32—Small photo of a Mexico flag

33—Photo showing the screen of a laptop, people in a classroom setting, and a larger screen at front of a classroom; both screens show the opener for a “Child Sex Trafficking Case Study.” Caption for photo reads: Left: AATTAP Associate Heidi Chance (front right) presented a case study on child sex trafficking at the 2024 Alerta AMBER Conference in Huatulco, Mexico.

34—Photo of a missing 1-year-old girl and details of her for an AMBER Alert. Caption for photo reads: Below center: A case involving the abduction of a 1-year-old played out in real time during the 2023 conference.

35—Photo of three men and a woman sitting around a table talking. Caption for photo reads: Below right: An AATTAP Northern Border Initiative meeting in Canada.

36—Small photo of a Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) flag

37—Small photo of a Puerto Rico flag

38—Small photo of a Serbia flag

39—Small photo of U.S. Virgin Islands flag

40—Photo of a computer screen showing 25 squares with a person or name of someone attending a virtual meeting. Caption for photo reads: Left: More than 200 child protection professionals in Argentina joined the AATTAP team for a virtual meeting that focused on child abduction response teams (CARTs).

41—Photo showing a close-up of a child’s eyes incorporated into a banner about the Serbia AMBER Alert, with some words written in non-English. Caption for photo reads: Below: Serbia’s AMBER Alert is named “Pronadji Me” (“Find Me”).

42—Small photo of a United States of America flag

43—Small photo of an American Samoa (AS) flag

44—Small photo of an Argentina flag

45—Small photo of a Bosnia flag

## FRONT LINES

### Finding the Right Words

With every minute precious in the search for a missing child, a revolutionary new geolocator tool, what3words, is winning support from emergency responders. A North Texas case involving two lost teens reveals why.

By Rebecca Sherman

David Boots, Battalion Chief of the Denton, Texas, Fire Department, was at home listening to radio communications when the call went out. It was 8:30 p.m. on June 5, 2024, and the sun was beginning to set. Two teenage boys on bikes were stranded deep inside Denton's Greenbelt Corridor, a 20-mile, heavily forested nature trail connecting the Ray Roberts Dam with the headwaters of Lake Lewisville.

Chief Boots felt a knot in his stomach. He knew the area well; the department had rescued hikers who had become lost on the trail before, but this time was different. Storms earlier in the week had created treacherous flooding conditions that forced the closure of the Greenbelt.

Getting the teens out in the dark would be difficult and risky, not only for them, but also his rescue teams. Worse still was the news that high winds and torrential rains would soon be barreling in from Oklahoma. "A flooded greenbelt is not a good place to be during a storm," Boots says.

Thankfully one of the teens had a cell phone with him. And the Denton Police Department had access to what3words, a revolutionary new geolocation tool. (Learn more on page 13.)

#### **A Call for Help**

The boys' day had begun well enough, with sunny skies accompanying them on their morning ride to the lake. But after wheeling onto the Greenbelt trail, bypassing closure barriers, they found themselves in dire straits. They had lost their bearings trying to navigate around impassable, and at times impossible to see, pathways to safety. They had no real sense of where they had meandered, or the danger they were in, and needed to be located and brought to safety quickly. Their lives were in danger.

"They got down into swampy water—deep at times—and muddy, with logs covering the trails," Boots says. The boys had been there for hours. "One of their cell phones went dead," Boots continues. "When the sun went down, they were well into the Greenbelt and surrounded by water. They knew they were in trouble."

When the boys called 911, the Denton Police Department Dispatch Center enlisted what3words technology to immediately pinpoint their precise location—as well as the best route to find them. That data was then forwarded to rescue teams.

In the past, the Denton Police Department relied solely on triangulated pings from nearby cell phone towers to get a general idea of where to find missing individuals when mobile devices were involved. And while they could also request helicopter assistance, such resources take time to deploy. Thus, the location data provided by what3words has proven to be invaluable, says Suzanne Kaletta, Assistant Director of Public Communications for the City of Denton. The app’s accuracy has been “a game-changer” since they began using it in 2022, Kaletta says. It has shaved hours from searches involving difficult terrain.

### **Harrowing Rescue Mission**

Racing against time, Boots led more than 20 rescuers who were deployed to find the teens. “We put an ATV in at the halfway point between the lakes, but it couldn’t get to them,” he says. “Another team in an inflatable boat had to paddle the creek upstream to try to get close enough, but debris blocked the way.” The team abandoned the boat and set out on foot, in the dark and through deep, snake-infested waters.

In the summer heat, the rescuers were “soaked to the bone and sweating so much they had trouble holding onto their phones for navigation,” Boots recalls. A drone crew attempted to guide their way, but the forest’s dense tree canopy below made it difficult to spot them.

Rescuers reached the teens at around 11:25 p.m., some three hours after their call to 911. They were hot, wet, tired, and scared—and their ordeal was far from over. A journey with rescuers leading the way back to the boat through swampy floodwaters and nighttime conditions still lay ahead. So did the storm’s approach from the north.

Everyone was on edge as they did the mental countdown of when it would hit. “We knew we had an hour; then just 30 minutes,” Boots says. “We finally got them out with 15 minutes to spare. It was unnervingly close.”

And this much is certain: Without the geolocation assistance from what3words—coupled with the tenacity and skill of the North Texas emergency responders—the boys may not have made it out of the woods.

### **[Display text]**

“It’s especially helpful for places without a street address, such as bodies of water or rural locations.”

Suzanne Kaletta, Assistant Director of Public Communications in Denton, Texas, referring to the what3words geolocation tool used to locate two boys stranded on a forested Texas nature trail during flooding conditions

**[Photos]**

1—Photo of two boys on bicycles on a wooded trail with water over it; one boy is looking at his cell phone. There are white square-like graphics on top of the photo. Credit for photo reads: Photo Illustration

2—Photo of a forested Texas natural trail

3—Photo of a man wearing a white and red hardhat and looking out onto the horizon. Caption for photo reads: David Boots, Battalion Chief of the Denton, Texas, Fire Department led the rescue for the stranded boys, who had bypassed closure barriers on the nature trail. Credit for photo reads: Photos (this page and previous): City of Denton

3—Photo showing flooded and debris-strewn nature trail, blocked and cordoned off with a sign that reads “Trail Closed” and another that reads “Area Closed.” Caption for photo reads: David Boots, Battalion Chief of the Denton, Texas, Fire Department led the rescue for the stranded boys, who had bypassed closure barriers on the nature trail.

## COVER STORY SIDEBAR

### what3words: What it's about

What is what3words? The satellite-powered digital geocoding [system](#)—free for first responders and as an iOS or Android app—helps identify precise locations. It has divided the world into a grid of 10-foot by 10-foot squares, and given each square a unique combination of three random words. Each three-word “address” lets emergency responders pinpoint a cell phone caller’s GPS coordinates, even in sprawling national parks and large bodies of water. All that is needed is a cellular signal and a smartphone with “location service” enabled.

**How are U.S. law enforcement agencies using it?** More than 400 public safety teams (including police departments in Dallas and Los Angeles) across 49 states are using what3words technology to locate people. What3Words is compatible with many CAD systems and public safety communication tools, including RapidSOS, Rapid Deploy, and other software partners.

**How can it help find children?** For a law enforcement agency equipped with what3words technology, any child or endangered adult who calls can be found within minutes if they call 911 from a location-service enabled cell phone. This is especially helpful if an individual does not know where they are, which often is the case if they have been transported to an unknown location.

**Is using what3words better than cell phone pinging?** The use of what3words is not meant to replace the analysis of cell phone geolocation data, which can paint a fuller picture of where a missing child (or a suspected abductor) has been and may be headed. Its advantage lies in being able to narrow a search to 10 feet, which is valuable in large urban areas (with a density of cell towers), where a cell phone ping can land up to 3,600 feet away—think 10 football fields—from where a phone may be.

**How does the public use it?** Family members and friends of younger smartphone users are enlisting the app to more quickly and accurately find each other in large venue environments, such as state fairs, malls, and other big or crowded events.

**What other countries use it?** The software is used by 85 percent of UK emergency services, as well as 50 control centers across Canada. It also is used throughout Europe, Australia, South Africa, India, and most recently, Vietnam.

**How can my agency learn more about it?** Contact [support@what3words.com](mailto:support@what3words.com) to request free training and tech sessions.



**[Display text]**

Web Extra

Click [here](#) to learn more about what3words, including how best to get started using it.

**[Photo]**

1—Aerial photo showing roofs of houses in a neighborhood, with outlined squares placed over the photo to represent how a geolocation tool identifies precise locations. Caption for photo reads: The what3words geolocation tool assigns three unique words to 10-foot squares across the world.

## FACES

### Moving With a Purpose

Sheriff's Deputy Wes Brough's dramatic water rescue of a Florida boy with autism shows how a sense of urgency pays off in missing child cases.

By Jody Garlock

Deputy Wes Brough has been in law enforcement for what he matter-of-factly describes as “a crazy” five years. In that short time with the Volusia County Sheriff's Office in DeLand, Florida, he has worked AMBER Alerts, saved a teen who was contemplating jumping off a bridge, and, most recently, been hailed a hero for rescuing a missing 5-year-old boy with autism. In the latter case, the dramatic body-cam footage of Brough running into a large pond to carry the missing child to safety put him in a national spotlight after the video went viral—and showed how dangerously close the story was to a sad outcome.

That August 2024 day remains fresh in his mind. Brough (pronounced “Bruff”) was on routine patrol in Deltona (in east-central Florida) when a 911 call reporting the child missing came in—a call he and other officers were able to hear in real time thanks to a new telecommunication system.

Brough was first on the scene, followed shortly by another officer who helped search the family's house to confirm the boy wasn't there. Dispatched officers soon arrived and the search area expanded.

After hearing of a possible sighting of the child behind a nearby home, Brough's autism awareness training kicked in. Knowing that area had wooded wetlands and that children with autism are drawn to water, Brough took off running. Hurling tree debris and calling the boy's name as he approached a nearby trail and pond, the breathless deputy would momentarily stop to look for any signs of movement in the water or footprints on the swampy ground.

At first Brough didn't see any signs of the child. But then the boy, who is nonverbal, made a noise, likely after noticing Brough through the trees. The deputy ran toward the sound, and after spotting the boy in the pond, yelled, “I got him! I got him!” as he ran into the near-waist-high water where the 5-year-old was holding on to a branch. He would soon cling safely to Brough as they made their way back to land. There, as darkness neared, medics checked the boy's health before he was reunited with his frightened family. The swift recovery was completed about 20 minutes after the 911 call that reported the child missing.

We talked with Brough about the incident and the lessons it may hold for others in law enforcement.

**How does it feel to be called a hero?**

That's a big title honestly—especially when anybody in my position would have done the exact same thing. I'm very honored, but I'm staying humble and giving the glory to God for helping me do the right thing in the right moment.

**What type of training helped prepare you for such an incident?**

We have critical incident training when we come through the sheriff's office, and it focuses on different types of behavior. We also go through autism awareness training which includes meeting with children with autism and their families who live in our community; it's very in depth. It covers the dangers a child with autism can face, and understanding the biggest cause of death: drowning. That's a big factor here in Florida, where there's so much water. We learn how to interact with children with autism and the different levels of the autism spectrum. We also look at different scenarios that we in law enforcement might face, whether it's responding to a runaway child or a suspicious person. You never know when the person you're interacting with may have autism, so being aware, and picking up on social cues, is important.

**Are there ways to better engage the public about missing autistic children?**

There's always room for more communication between an agency and the public, especially on a subject like this. An easy way is through social media posts. Also, parents should be encouraged to never hesitate to call 911 if their child goes missing. The boy's family did a wonderful job of calling as soon as they heard the alarm on their door go off. We'd rather have the call get canceled on the way to search for a missing child instead of being 20 minutes behind the curve.

**What lessons did you learn that others could apply—what are your takeaways?**

One, a lot of good work gets done when you stay calm under pressure. And two, it's important to have a sense of urgency. Too often complacency can kick in; you think a missing kid may be at a friend's house or hiding in a shed. You might walk rather than run. When I picked up the log the boy was holding onto in the water, it broke in half. It was only a matter of time before it broke while he was holding on to it, or that he went out deeper into the water. Hindsight is 20/20, but I'm glad I had the sense of urgency to run from the road to the pond. It was moving with a purpose. There can't be hesitation when the priority is someone's life.

**[Display text]**

“Autism doesn't have a face. You could look at somebody, and you wouldn't know they have autism. As law enforcement who have daily interactions with the public, you need to be aware of the different levels on the spectrum and read the different social cues.”

Deputy Wes Brough

Volusia Sheriff's Office, DeLand, Florida

**[Display text]**

Watch Deputy Wes Brough's remarkable water [rescue](#) of the missing 5-year-old Florida boy.

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Drownings account for 84 percent of the accidental deaths of children with autism who go missing, according to a 10-year analysis by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children.

**[Photos]**

1—Photo of Deputy Wes Brough wearing his sheriff vest and standing in front of an American flag.

2—Photo of boy with arms wrapped around rescuer as he is carried from a pond. Caption for photo reads: The child clung tightly as Deputy Wes Brough carried him to safety. Brough received an email from the boy's out-of-state relatives who watched the rescue footage. "They said that they could tell how thankful he was by the way he touched my face," Brough says.

## FACES SIDEBAR

### 4 tips: Be in the know about autism

Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) wander or go missing at a higher rate than other children—a behavior known as elopement. They may be trying to get away from loud sounds or stimuli, or seeking out places of special interest that pique their curiosities. The National Autism Association (NAA) shares the following tips all first responders should know.

**Know the signs.** A person with autism may have an impaired sense of danger, and, as such, may wander into water, traffic, or other perils. They may not speak or respond to their name, and may appear deaf. They need time to process questions, may repeat phrases, and may try to run away or hide. And they may rock, pace, spin, or flap their hands.

**Know how to search.** Act quickly and treat the case as critical since a child with autism may head straight to a source of danger, such as water, traffic, or an abandoned vehicle. First search any nearby body of water, even if the child is thought to fear it. Ask about the child's likes and dislikes, including potential fears such as search dogs or siren sounds.

**Know how to interact.** Don't assume a person with autism will respond to "stop" or other commands or questions. If they're not in danger, allow space and avoid touching. Get on the child's level and speak in a reassuring tone, using simple phrases—even if the person is nonverbal. Offering a phone to a nonverbal person to communicate via typing may be helpful.

**Know about resources.** Beyond agency training, law enforcement officers can find online resources. The National Autism Association offers a downloadable [brochure](#) with tips for first responders on its website. Additionally, the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children also offers excellent online resources on its [website](#).

## NEWS BRIEFS: UNITED STATES

### U.S. Marshals rescue 200 missing children

Calling it one of his agency's "most sacred missions," U.S. Marshals Service Director Ronald L. Davis vowed that recovering the nation's critically missing children will remain a top priority. His comment came on the heels of a [nationwide operation](#) that recovered 200 missing children, including endangered runaways and those abducted by noncustodial parents, deemed at high risk for danger. The May-June "Operation We Will Find You 2," the second of its kind, brought together federal, state, and local agencies; the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) provided technical assistance. The search led to the [recovery](#) and removal of 123 children from dangerous situations. An additional 77 missing children were found to be in safe locations. NCMEC President and CEO Michelle DeLaune said the effort is a "shining example of the results we can achieve when we unite in our mission to find missing children."

### AI could become 'playground for online predators'

The growing use of generative artificial intelligence (GAI) is raising concerns about the dangers it poses to child safety, with the Internet Watch Foundation calling it a potential "playground for online predators." Pedophiles and bad actors are using [GAI](#) to manipulate child sexual abuse material (CSAM), with a child's face transplanted onto the footage, or to create deepfake sexually explicit videos using an innocent photo of a real child. IWF expects more—and higher quality—CSAM videos to emerge as the technology grows. The group is pushing for controls, such as making it illegal to create guides on generating AI-made CSAM. The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children is also pushing for updates in federal and state [laws](#) pertaining to GAI CSAM. Additionally, AI-made CSAM is reportedly overwhelming law enforcement's ability to identify and rescue real-life victims.

### Kentucky enacts alert for children with autism

The tragic story of a 9-year-old boy with autism who drowned after running away from a children's home has led to a new missing child alert in Kentucky. The "[Ian Alert](#)," named after Ian Sousis who died in 2022, is designed to help quickly and safely recover missing autistic children through a notification system comparable to the AMBER Alert. Children with autism are drawn to water and face drowning as the leading cause of death. The new alert will cover gaps between other alerts and use the same system as the AMBER Alert. Kentucky Emergency Management has been developing policies for implementation after Governor Andy Beshear signed the alert into law. "This is another tool in the toolbox," said Lt. Phillip Ridgell of the Boone County Sheriff's Department.

## NEWS BRIEFS: INDIAN COUNTRY

### Two senators introduce bill to ease Tribal law enforcement access to electronic evidence

Tribal courts could soon have easier access to [electronic evidence](#) such as emails and social media messages in criminal cases—a move that would be beneficial, among other things, in Internet crimes against children investigations. U.S. Senators Catherine Cortez Masto of Nevada and Mike Rounds of South Dakota introduced the bipartisan Tribal Access to Electronic Evidence Act as a way to give Tribal courts equitable access and better equip them to deliver justice for victims. “We know that criminals are using online tools to traffic drugs and commit other crimes in Indian Country,” Cortez Masto said. “What we also know is that tribal courts struggle to get electronic evidence because tech companies won’t honor those tribal warrants.” Rounds added that it’s important that Tribal law enforcement is able to do its job “without the federal government getting in the way.”

### U.S. Justice Department in process of building partnerships to address MMIW crisis

Saying that there is “still so much more to do,” U.S. Attorney General Merrick B. Garland vowed to continue prioritizing [efforts](#) to combat the Missing or Murdered Indigenous Persons (MMIP) crisis. Initiatives include the U.S. Department of Justice’s (DOJ) MMIP Regional Outreach Program which places attorneys and coordinators in regions across the U.S. to help prevent and respond in MMIP cases. And during a visit to the Crow Indian Reservation in Montana, Garland announced that, based on the Not Invisible Act Commission’s recommendations, DOJ is working to improve funding, enhance research to better trace underlying causes, and develop guidance on engaging the public when someone is reported missing. “Tribal communities deserve safety, and they deserve justice,” Garland said in highlighting some of the efforts on National Missing or Murdered Indigenous Persons Awareness Day in May. “This day challenges all of us at the Justice Department to double down on our efforts, and be true partners with Tribal communities.”

### Arizona motorcycle group shines light on missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls

Indigenous female motorcyclists continue to rev up their engines—as well as their messaging—to raise awareness about the high rate of missing and murdered girls and women in Native American communities. This past July, the Medicine Wheel Ride motorcycle group from Phoenix partnered with the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians in Santa Barbara County, California, for a “We Ride for Her” [event](#). Organized through the Santa Ynez Tribal Health Clinic, the event featured a screening of the “We Ride for Her” documentary highlighting the motorcycle group’s work, which includes fundraising, assisting advocates searching for missing Native American girls and women, and raising awareness through annual

rallies and rides. The Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians remains the only federally recognized Chumash tribe in the nation.



## NEWS BRIEFS: INTERNATIONAL

### Investigation: Cartels exploiting migrant children

European cocaine gangs are torturing and raping unaccompanied African [child migrants](#) to control and force them into the country's expanding cocaine trade, according to an investigation by the British newspaper *The Guardian*. Some of the most dangerous criminal networks recruit vulnerable children to exploit for trafficking—a tactic that helps the networks evade prosecution and protect their core members. The newspaper's investigation reported that thousands of migrant children could be involved. An investigation by the journalist collective Lost in Europe found that nearly 47 unaccompanied child migrants vanish each day after arriving in Europe, totaling tens of thousands in the past three years.

### Legal red tape keeps missing children in UK

Legal red tape is preventing two Israeli children from returning home until the end of the year or longer. In July, the *Jewish Chronicle* reported that a 12-year-old girl was sent to the UK alone by her mother; her 9-year-old brother arrived a year earlier to live with a family friend in Leeds. The girl, who is staying in a hostel in London, has now claimed [asylum](#) in the UK. Officials in both countries are working to repatriate the children but have been hampered by international law governing minors. Additionally, asylum cases can take years to resolve, according to the Israeli Ministry of Social Affairs. The children's case remains under police investigation and Chief Inspector Avi Rosh of Tel Aviv District Police said he expects to charge the mother with neglect of a minor and abandoning a minor.

### El Salvador war babies search for families

During the Salvadoran Civil War in the early 1980s, babies and young [children](#) were regularly seized by the army during anti-guerrilla operations, some taken by soldiers directly from their parents. Others were discovered in hiding places, apparently left behind as their families fled, and later given away for adoption. The nongovernmental organization Pro-Busqueda has helped locate 400 children since its founding in 1994 and is still searching for as many as 500 others reported missing during the 12-year war.

### AI partnership finds 110 child sex abuse victims

The International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children (ICMEC) and Clearview AI [conducted](#) an operation in Ecuador this past spring that resulted in locating and positively identifying 110 previously unknown child sexual abuse victims. The operation, held in Ecuador and hosted by ICMEC, used Clearview AI's facial recognition technology as a main resource. Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Peru, and the Dominican Republic were among the countries that worked together on hundreds of cold cases involving previously unknown victims of online child sexual exploitation and abuse.