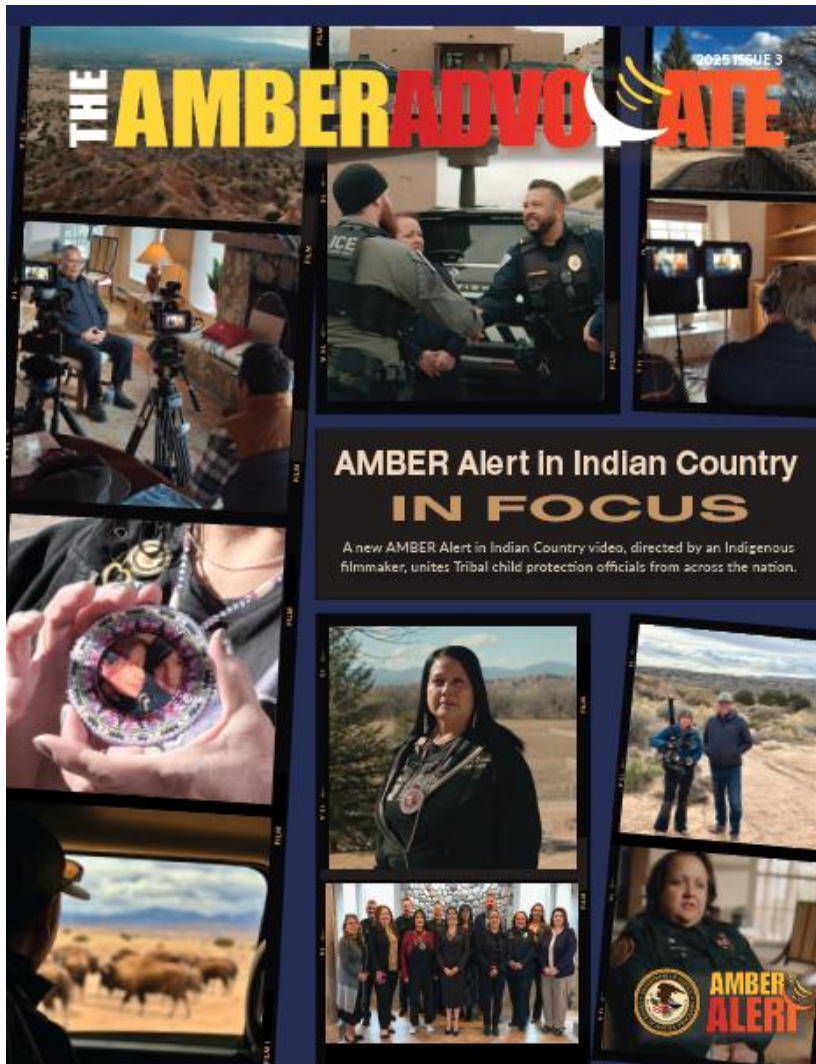


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AMBER ADVOCATE 63



The AMBER Advocate, 2025 Issue 3

AMBER Alert in Indian Country IN FOCUS

A new AMBER Alert in Indian Country video, directed by an Indigenous filmmaker, unites Tribal child protection officials from across the nation.

[Photos]

1—A collage of photos placed to look like they are in black film strips against a dark blue background and arranged as follows:

—The film strip on the left contains four photos and goes vertically down the left side of the cover. The photos are, from top: An arid landscape with rugged plateaus/mountains taken from above; a man wearing a black police officer uniform sitting in a chair in a living room setting looking toward a camera/filming equipment on a tripod a few feet in front of him, with another man behind the camera looking toward the screen on the camera equipment; a close-up photo of a woman's hands holding a beaded necklace with a photo of a young dark-hair girl and a lighter-hair woman; and a person looking out the window of a vehicle toward a herd of bison.

—The short film strip on the top center has two photos. The top photo shows a police building with black SUVs parked in front of it. The bottom photo shows a bearded man wearing a black police uniform shaking hands with a man wearing an Army green jacket with a black vest that says "Police" on the back; a woman wearing a black police uniform is in the center looking on.

—The short film strip on the bottom center has two photos. The top photo shows a woman with long dark hair and wearing a black shirt, zip-up hooded sweatshirt, and beaded necklace with a large center medallion. She is standing outside near an evergreen tree. The bottom photo shows a group of 13 people standing indoors in front of a background that includes stone and windows. The group is in two rows. Seven women are in the first row. Four men and two women are in the row behind them. One woman and two men are wearing black law enforcement uniforms.

—The short film strip on the top right has two photos. The top photo shows an arid landscape with a road and fence that curves around toward a large building in the distance. The bottom photo shows two people, from the back, looking at two video monitors/screens. On each screen, there is an image of a man wearing a black police uniform. One person watching the monitors/screens is wearing headphones.

—The short film strip on the bottom right has two photos. The top photo a woman and a man standing outside in an arid landscape. The woman is holding camera/filming equipment and is wearing a putty-color stocking hat, blue coat, and black pants or jeans. The man is wearing a baseball-style hat, a black hooded jacket, and blue jeans. The bottom photo shows a dark-hair woman wearing a black law enforcement uniform sitting on a chair in what appears to be inside a home.

COVER STORY

Help, Unity & Hope in focus

A new video project about AMBER Alert in Indian Country has U.S. Tribal child protection leaders calling for enhanced training and collaboration to help save lives.

By Denise Gee Peacock

“Ashlynn’s love is like a bright light that shines over Indian Country. It has caused me to move mountains.”

– Pamela Foster, mother of Ashlynn Mike (2004–2016)

Our children are the heart of our communities—the keeper of our legacies. But sometimes the unthinkable happens. A child goes missing. And in those desperate moments, every second counts. So do AMBER Alerts. Thus begins a new eight-minute AMBER Alert in Indian Country-focused video filmed in Santa Fe. It is the longest of three videos that focus on AMBER Alert being a lifeline—a rapid response system that mobilizes entire communities to help find missing and abducted children quickly and safely.

In Indian Country, implementing AMBER Alert comes with unique challenges: jurisdictional rights, infrastructure and resources limitations, crime reporting complexities, and the need for cultural understanding and multiagency collaboration.

The AMBER Alert in Indian Country ([AIIC](#)) initiative—part of the AMBER Alert Training & Technical Assistance Program (AATTAP) of the National Criminal Justice Training Center (NCJTC) of Fox Valley Technical College—is a bridge meant to overcome such issues.

“We all have a role to play in protecting our children,” says NCJTC Director and AATTAP Administrator Janell Rasmussen. “By working together, we can ensure that every community in Indian Country has the resources and support they need to implement AMBER Alert effectively.”

The goal of the new video (one of three in total) and AIIC training, is to:

- Cultivate awareness and build knowledge of available resources and support systems for Indian Country.
- Encourage American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities to implement effective response plans.

- Help Tribes understand the basics of the AMBER Alert system and evaluate their community's preparedness.
- Promote the relationship-building between AI/AN, state agencies, and law enforcement.
- Emphasize the need for cultural awareness in handling missing/abducted children cases.
- Build agency among AI/AN communities to take proactive measures to safeguard their children—and their children's children.

The AATTAP-AIIC team worked with two Indigenous filmmakers who form the heart of [Bravebird](#), a company that regularly collaborates with the nationally respected marketing firm [6 AM](#). Both firms are based in Wisconsin, and both “were perfect to work with based on their understanding of the sensitivity of this story,” says Tyesha M. Wood, Program Manager for AATTAP’s AMBER Alert in Indian Country initiative. “We wanted to bring together voices of child protection officials from Tribes across the nation—law enforcement leaders and others who could feel comfortable in expressing what their concerns are and how the AMBER Alert in Indian Country program has helped them. And how it can help others too,” Wood says.

The video was filmed on the Pueblo of Pojoaque reservation, known to have existed since 500 AD. The New Mexico Tribe played host to the video’s participants, who came from northern California, south Louisiana, northern Florida, and all points in between.

AIIC’s main champion in the video series is Pamela Foster, who figured prominently in the [first video](#) produced for the initiative after passage of the Ashlynne Mike AMBER Alert in Indian Country Act of 2018. Foster is the mother of Ashlynne, who on May 2, 2016, was abducted—along with her brother Ian—and murdered in a remote area on the Navajo Nation. Ian managed to escape and run several miles to seek help. But while Ashlynne’s parents made frantic efforts to locate her, misunderstandings and jurisdictional hurdles on the reservation prevented an AMBER Alert from being issued until the next day, robbing authorities of critical hours in their search efforts.

“On that day, a part of me died, and life has never been the same,” Foster says. But it also propelled her to lobby for legislative change that would prevent another Tribal family from experiencing what hers did.

“I made a promise to Ashlynne that I would do my part to fix the loophole that exists in the system,” Foster says. “I would fight with every fiber of my being to bring AMBER Alert to Indian Country.”

The video underscores the urgency of implementing AMBER Alerts through the lens of law enforcement professionals and others working on the front lines of protecting Tribal children and others.

“For far too long, an epidemic has been playing out in Indian Country as it relates to missing and murdered Indigenous children, adults, wives, relatives, brothers, and fathers. And it is a monster,” says Major Nathan Barton of the Pueblo of Pojoaque Police Department.

Foster makes a direct appeal to Tribal leaders. “If you haven’t already received the AIIC training, please reach out. Thanks to Ashlynn’s law, we can work with you to establish an AMBER Alert plan,” she says. “What’s more, the training is free and accessible, and it’s adaptive to your needs. We just need more Tribal participation for this to be effective.”

ACTION ITEMS:

- Learn more about how AMBER Alert can protect Tribal children. Visit AMBERAdvocate.org/AIIC or email AskAMBER@fvtc.edu for more information.
- Follow [AMBER Alert in Indian Country courses](#) online, including the comprehensive [MCI-IC series](#).
- Contact your local Tribal leaders to discuss the importance of having an AMBER Alert response plan in place.

[Display text]

“Words like ‘sovereignty’ and ‘jurisdiction’ have almost become taboo. But any child who is missing should be the priority. It doesn’t matter where the resources are coming from. Let’s locate that child.”

Jada Breaux, Captain, Chitimacha Tribal Police (Louisiana)

[Display text]

Watch the videos by clicking [here](#) or visiting AMBERAdvocate.org/AIIC.

[Display text]

“When missing children go silent, it’s a scream you cannot hear. Reach out to the AMBER Alert in Indian Country program now to be prepared.”

Joshua Keliikoa, Public Safety Manager, Rincon Band of Luiseño Indians (California)

[Display text]

“How can we protect our children? How can we ensure the best response is made when a child is missing or kidnapped?”

Jenelle Roybal, Governor, Pueblo of Pojoaque (New Mexico)

[Display text]

“Ashlynnne made it possible for Tribes to implement an AMBER Alert system. Now it’s up to Tribes to make it happen.”

Pamela Foster, mother of Ashlynnne Mike (2004-2016) and an advocate for AMBER Alert in Indian Country

[Display text]

A MOTHER’S LOVE FOR ASHLYNNNE

Read about Pamela Foster’s unwavering determination to bring AMBER Alert to Indian Country [here](#).

[Display text]

“Just because nothing’s happened doesn’t mean it won’t. The wolf is at the door. And we need to help each other or we won’t solve this problem.”

Laurie Gonzalez, Councilwoman, Rincon Band of Luiseño Indians (California)

[Display text]

“You don’t have to do it alone. Tribes across the U.S. are willing to share what works in getting AMBER Alert in Indian Country.”

Greg O’Rourke, Chief, Yurok Tribal Police Department (California)

[Display text]

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

Understand the ways AATTAP’s AMBER Alert in Indian Country initiative can enhance Tribal response capacities for finding missing and endangered children by clicking [here](#).

[Display text]

“AMBER Alert is the safety net for our children in danger. It’s our job and our responsibility to fight for them and be their voice.”

Freddie Trujillo, Chief, Pueblo of Pojoaque Police (New Mexico)

[Display text]

“Being fortunate doesn’t alleviate the responsibility of having a comprehensive plan for prevention and response in place.”

Taylor Patterson, Deputy Chief, Miccosukee Police Department (Florida)

[Display text]

“When a child goes missing I can see the hurt in their family’s eyes. That empowers our team to work quickly, and diligently, on their behalf.”

Nathan Barton, Major, Pueblo of Pojoaque Police Department (New Mexico)

[Display text]

“Although we are many nations, we are one in this commitment.”

Tyesha M. Wood, AATTAP Program Manager, AMBER Alert in Indian Country

[Display text]

Bravebird: ‘Telling stories with dignity’

Film director Alex Miranda and producer Tim Peters are the principals of [Bravebird](#), an Indigenous-led filmmaking group that specializes in telling the stories of Indian Country.

“For us, and our families and communities, it’s important to tell the stories with care, authenticity, and dignity,” Miranda says.

One aspect of their work that shines through: “The land. Mother Earth,” Miranda says. “She helps us realize that stories such as Ashlynn’s will never be forgotten.”

[Display text]

More in Focus

Click [here](#) to see a slideshow of photos related to this story.

[Photos/captions]

1—Full-page photo showing a close-up of a cream, red, brown, and black blanket with two brownish feathers and a rustic pestle-like bowl on top. The story title “Help, Unity & Hope in focus,” the story introduction, and a beige box that contains the start of the story and three small photos are placed on top of the full-page photo. Caption for photo reads: Smudging tools were used to bless the video project in Santa Fe.

2—Small photo showing a close-up of a piece of video equipment with a screen that shows a dark-hair woman seated in a chair.

3—Small photo showing rugged plateaus/mountains in an arid landscape.

4—Small photo of a black-and-white photo of a dark-hair girl placed on top of a colorful white background with writing on it.

5—Photo taken from above showing an arid landscape with a community visible in the distance.

6—Photo showing signage on a building; the signage is a blue, white, red, and yellow police logo. The signage reads “Police” in yellow and “Pueblo of Pojoaque N.M.” in a dark blue. A graphic that resembles a Native American headdress placed in a circular design is in the center.

7—Landscape photo showing a close-up of a prickly plant that looks like a cactus; the background is blurred so the focus is on the plant.

8—Photo of a dark-hair woman wearing a black law enforcement uniform sitting on a chair in what appears to be inside a home. A quote in dark red type below the photo reads: “Words like ‘sovereignty’ and ‘jurisdiction’ have almost become taboo. But any child who is missing should be the priority. It doesn’t matter where the resources are coming from. Let’s locate that child.” Jada Breaux, Captain, Chitimacha Tribal Police (Louisiana)

9—Small photo showing a clapperboard used in film and video production sitting in front of a cactus potted in a dark red container; they appear to be inside a home. Information below the photo reads: Watch the videos by clicking [here](#) or visiting [AMBERAdvocate.org/AIIC](#).

10—Photo of a gray-hair man wearing a dark gray suit with a gold lapel pin and a blue-gray tie sitting in a chair in what appears to be inside a home. A quote in red type next to the photo reads: “When missing children go silent, it’s a scream you cannot hear. Reach out to the AMBER Alert in Indian Country program now to be prepared.” Joshua Keliikoa, Public Safety Manager, Rincon Band of Luiseño Indians (California)

11—Photo showing two people, from the back, looking at two video monitors/screens. On each screen, there is an image of a man wearing a black police uniform. One person watching the monitors/screens is wearing black headphones. Caption for the photo reads: The 6 AM Marketing team monitors visual and audio progress.

12—Photo showing a woman and a man, both wearing black law enforcement uniforms, standing in front of a black vehicle. The woman and man are looking at each other, smiling and shaking hands. In the foreground, two men shown from the back are looking at the people shaking hands. A building and arid landscape are in the background. Caption for the photo reads: Captain Jada Breaux with Louisiana’s Chitimacha Tribe greets Tribal law enforcement arriving from other states.

13—Photo showing a group of nine people. A woman and three men are in the front row, sitting cross-legged on a green rug. Three women and two men are seated in a row behind them. Caption for the photo reads: The AATTAP-AIIC team, visiting law enforcement, and principals with the film company Bravebird enjoy some down time after the first day of production work.

14—Photo of a production crew with camera/filming equipment pointed toward a woman sitting in a wooden chair inside a home. In the foreground, two men, shown from the back, are operating video equipment on tripods and there is a tall black umbrella-like reflector that says

“Parabolix 55” on the side. In the background, a man is standing with a clapperboard used for film and video directing.

15—Small photo of a woman with dark hair and a black blazer and skirt sitting in a wooden chair. A quote in dark red type below the photo reads: “How can we protect our children? How can we ensure the best response is made when a child is missing or kidnapped?” Jenelle Roybal, Governor, Pueblo of Pojoaque (New Mexico)

16—Photo of a woman and a man standing outside in an arid landscape. The woman is holding camera/filming equipment and has on a putty-color stocking hat, blue coat, and black pants. The man is wearing a baseball-style hat, a black hooded jacket, and blue jeans.

17—Photo of rugged arid terrain taken from above and showing the tops of green trees and vegetation, a dirt road, and elevations such as plateaus/mountains.

18, 19, 20—A series of three photos, in a horizontal row, of the same woman standing outside. She has long dark hair and is wearing a black shirt with a black zip-up hooded sweatshirt/jacket. She also is wearing a large round necklace with beading. The photo on the left is taken from the woman’s side, and she is looking right. In the middle photo, the woman is looking toward the camera. The right photo was taken from the woman’s side, and she is looking toward the left. An evergreen tree in an arid landscape is in the background in all three photos. A quote below the photo on the left in dark red type reads: “Ashlynnne made it possible for Tribes to implement an AMBER Alert system. Now it’s up to Tribes to make it happen.” Pamela Foster, mother of Ashlynnne Mike (2004-2016) and an advocate for AMBER Alert in Indian Country

19—Close-up photo of a woman’s hands holding up a beaded necklace she is wearing. The necklace has a large round beaded medallion with a photo in the center of a dark-hair girl and a lighter-hair woman next to her, with their heads touching. Information below the photo reads: A MOTHER’S LOVE FOR ASHLYNNNE Read about Pamela Foster’s unwavering determination to bring AMBER Alert to Indian Country [here](#).

20—Small photo of a woman with shoulder-length gray hair and glasses sitting in a chair. She is wearing a black blazer with a lapel pin and a black patterned top. She is also wearing a large necklace. A quote to the right of the photo in dark red type reads: “Just because nothing’s happened doesn’t mean it won’t. The wolf is at the door. And we need to help each other or we won’t solve this problem.” Laurie Gonzalez, Councilwoman, Rincon Band of Luiseño Indians (California)

21—Small photo of a man with cropped grayish-black hair wearing a black law enforcement uniform with a gold badge. He appears to be sitting in a chair. His right hand is raised to about shoulder height, as if he is emphasizing a point. A quote in dark red type to the right of the photo reads: “You don’t have to do it alone. Tribes across the U.S. are willing to share what works in getting AMBER Alert in Indian Country.” Greg O’Rourke, Chief, Yurok Tribal Police Department (California)

22—Photo of a group of 13 people standing indoors in front of a background that includes stone and windows. The group is in two rows. Seven women are in the first row. Four men and two women are in the row behind them. One woman and two men are wearing black law enforcement uniforms. A caption on the page reads: Members of the AATTAP-AIIC team, and dozens of others from across the nation, were on hand to produce the video, which promotes the advantages of AMBER Alert in Indian Country.

23—Small photo showing the words “Missing Person” in large red type on a piece of white paper. The top of the Missing Person sheet says “Pueblo of Pojoaque Police Department.” Below the Missing Person type is a photo of a girl with long dark hair and a bright pink shirt. To the left of the photo is a list describing the girl, such as her name, age, last seen, and other identifying information. Information below the photo reads: KNOWLEDGE IS POWER Understand the ways AATTAP’s AMBER Alert in Indian Country initiative can enhance Tribal response capacities for finding missing and endangered children by clicking [here](#).

24—Small photo showing a close-up of a police patch on the sleeve of someone wearing a black law enforcement uniform. The patch says “Tribal Police Chitimacha” and has a logo in the center. A caption on the page reads: Members of the AATTAP-AIIC team, and dozens of others from across the nation, were on hand to produce the video, which promotes the advantages of AMBER Alert in Indian Country.

25—Photo of a woman, taken from toward the side/back, wearing a black police uniform sitting on an upholstered dining chair. She is looking toward camera equipment on a tripod several feet in front of her. One man is standing and operating the camera equipment, while another is sitting next to him looking toward the camera equipment. Three other people are standing in the background against a reddish wall. A caption below the photo reads: Members of the AATTAP-AIIC team, and dozens of others from across the nation, were on hand to produce the video, which promotes the advantages of AMBER Alert in Indian Country.

26—Small photo of three women. The woman in front has dark hair and appears to be taking a group selfie. The two women behind her are looking toward the camera and smiling. A caption on the page reads: Members of the AATTAP-AIIC team, and dozens of others from across the nation, were on hand to produce the video, which promotes the advantages of AMBER Alert in Indian Country.

27—Photo of signage shaped to resemble a law enforcement badge hanging on a building. The signage reads “Officer Pueblo of Pojoaque Police NM.”

28—Photo taken from above showing rugged arid terrain with plateaus/mountains.

29—Photo of a person driving a gray off-road all-terrain vehicle (ATV). The words “Police Pueblo of Pojoaque” is in black lettering going across two doors of the vehicle.

30—Photo of a man with grayish short slicked-back hair and wire-rim glasses sitting in a chair in a home. He is wearing a black police uniform with a gold law enforcement badge on the left upper chest side. A quote next to the photo in dark red type reads: “AMBER Alert is the safety

net for our children in danger. It's our job and our responsibility to fight for them and be their voice." Freddie Trujillo, Chief, Pueblo of Pojoaque Police (New Mexico)

31—Photo of a grayish-hair man with a beard sitting in a chair in a living room-like setting. He is wearing a gray suit jacket with a law enforcement badge and lapel pins and a light-color dress shirt that is unbuttoned at the top. A quote next to the photo reads: "Being fortunate doesn't alleviate the responsibility of having a comprehensive plan for prevention and response in place." Taylor Patterson, Deputy Chief, Miccosukee Police Department (Florida)

32—Photo of a blonde-hair woman sitting on her heels on a flatbed portion of a white truck, surrounded by an arid landscape. She is holding camera/filming equipment and is looking down into one filming type of camera. She is wearing a blue coat and a wide gray ear-warmer headband. In the background, two bison are beginning to cross the dirt road.

33—Photo of a blonde-hair woman wearing a putty-color stocking hat and blue coat standing behind the back of a flatbed portion of a truck on a dirt road in an arid landscape. A drone is sitting on the flatbed. The woman is looking down at what appears to be the drone controls she is holding in her hands.

34—Photo showing camera/filming equipment on the seat of a vehicle and a person standing outside the open-door vehicle with arms resting on the seat. The person is wearing a putty-color stocking hat and blue coat and is holding an electronic device that has two black buttons toward the bottom.

35—Photo of a brownish-hair man with a stubble beard sitting in a home. He is wearing a black police uniform with a badge on the left chest and a black, red, and white police emblem on the right shoulder. A quote next to the photo in dark red type reads: "When a child goes missing I can see the hurt in their family's eyes. That empowers our team to work quickly, and diligently, on their behalf." Nathan Barton, Major, Pueblo of Pojoaque Police Department (New Mexico)

36—Photo of four men and a woman huddled together inside a building; one of the men is taking a selfie of the group. Four of the people are wearing coats and outerwear. Information below the photo reads: Bravebird: 'Telling stories with dignity'. Film director Alex Miranda (above left) and producer Tim Peters (back row, center) are the principals of Bravebird, an Indigenous-led filmmaking group that specializes in telling the stories of Indian Country.

37—Studio photo of a woman with grayish chin-length hair smiling toward the camera. She is wearing a black top and a necklace with multiple layers of brownish/reddish beads. A quote in dark red type below the photo reads: "Although we are many nations, we are one in this commitment." Tyesha M. Wood, AATTAP Program Manager, AMBER Alert in Indian Country

FRONT LINES

Mission: Rescue

A groundbreaking rescue operation in Upstate New York locates more than 60 missing children and shows the power of agencies uniting for a common goal.

By Jody Garlock

It's an early morning in March, and about 100 law enforcement officials, social services professionals, legal experts, and others are gathered in a hotel ballroom in Latham, New York. Wearing lanyards with name tags and sitting at tables with laptops and papers in front of them, they seem poised for a routine conference. But there's a seriousness in the air and laser focus as they work on their computers or huddle into small groups.

Eventually, the ringing of a bell sounds across the room. Heads turn toward a man holding a brass school bell as the realization sets in: A missing child has been located.

By the end of the three-day Capital Region Missing Child Rescue Operation, that bell will have been rung an impressive 63 times. Simultaneously, a computer screen projected onto a wall showed the number in big, bold lettering. Both served as uplifting motivators for the agencies and experts who united for a goal of finding missing children at risk of endangerment, exploitation, or harm. "After the first or second bell ring, everyone gets it—it's powerful," says Tim Williams, manager of the New York State Missing Persons Clearinghouse ([NYSMPC](#)), one of organizers. "You could feel the energy in the room continue to increase."

More than 60 local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies, nonprofit organizations, and private partners came together to explore new leads, review case notes, and leverage technology to find at-risk youth reported missing as runaways.

The 63 children and teens located during the first-ever [rescue operation](#) for the Albany, Schenectady, and Troy areas ranged in age from 2 to 17 years old when they were reported missing, and from 6 to 22 when found, according to the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS). And the overall number of those safely located continued to climb, as work that was started wrapped up after the event. Williams says 71 missing children have now been located as a direct result of the rescue operation.

“These are emotional events,” says Kevin Branzetti, CEO of the National Child Protection Task Force ([NCPTF](#)), which partnered with NYSMPC on the operation and has similar recovery missions scheduled in other states. “We know these cases can be emotional roller coasters. You see a lot of tears.”

To drive home the importance of such ventures, Branzetti and Williams point to statistics. At the end of 2024, New York had slightly more than 1,000 active missing children cases. The majority of the 12,000-plus cases annually—95 percent—are reported as runaways.

“Every missing child is an endangered missing child,” Williams says. “Our focus was the runaway population because it’s often overlooked.”

Strategic Teamwork

The Capital Region event grew out of training sessions between NYSMPC and the Arkansas-based NCPTF. “We started to think ‘Could we put all these people in the same room with the sole mission of finding kids and closing cases?’” Williams says.

In October 2024, NYSMPC and NCPTF spearheaded their first joint rescue operation. That venture in the [Buffalo area](#) safely located 47 children reported missing as runaways. Branzetti and Clearinghouse staffers, including Williams and Cindy Neff, who recently retired as NYSMPC manager (see sidebar), applied lessons they learned from the Buffalo operation. Comparatively, the Capital Region operation was more complex, involving coordination among three police departments, three district attorney’s offices, and three county social services agencies, along with many other entities.

“One of the most critical components is securing full buy-in from local partners, law enforcement, social services, district attorneys, and child advocacy centers,” Neff says. “Their collaboration is essential because these operations go beyond just locating missing youth. It’s also about understanding the underlying reasons they went missing and identifying the support needed to help prevent it from happening again.”

The Capital Region operation required months of planning and meetings to review cases with agencies and coordinate logistics. Participants were ultimately organized into four teams—two for Albany and one each for Schenectady and Troy. A pre-operation meeting was held for all the teams prior to the operation.

Each team had a similar composition: a Clearinghouse representative who acted as the organizer, a crime analyst who had access to local police records, at least one detective from

the agency working the case, representatives from NCTPF and the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC), a probation official, someone from social services, and various other law enforcement officials. The goal was to ensure that each team had a variety of resources and skill sets, be it public records searching, tracking a cell phone, understanding social media work, or open-source intelligence. “No two police departments have the same sets of tools,” Branzetti says. “Everyone brings their tools to the game, and we get to share them.”

Adding a social services component—and having those professionals in the room prepared to go out when a child was recovered—was one of the lessons learned from the prior operation. Branzetti, Williams, and Neff note that the goal wasn’t just to find the child, but also to try to ensure the child doesn’t go missing again. “What we promote deeply is ‘Find. Listen. Help,’ “ Branzetti says. “It takes more than police to do that. It’s a society problem.”

The state’s Office of Children and Family Services coordinated with nonprofit organizations and victim assistance programs to assist the investigations and provide services and support for recovered children. “There was a whole support-service side of this ready to go and available—and put into action many times,” Williams says. If a child already had an assigned case worker, that person was notified.

A unique component was providing gift cards to ensure a child or teen had essentials, such as food, clothing, or haircare services. In some cases, the gift cards became an outreach opportunity for the social services worker to schedule a follow-up to take a teen shopping. “We wanted her to see that something is different today,” says Branzetti, whose organization secured donations to provide the gift cards. “We wanted her to understand that this isn’t the same old story. It’s about changing the trajectory.”

Additionally, the rescue operation also helps destigmatize the word “runaway.” “It’s a matter of changing the mindset of what that means,” Williams says. “Everyone in the room is getting a better sense of the word as they work on the cases and realize that we can’t treat a runaway as ‘I’ll get to it when I get to it’ and instead say ‘Let’s make sure we’re doing something.’”

‘Remarkable’ Collaboration

Heading into the rescue operation, the organizers didn’t have a set goal for the number of children they wanted to find. “If we can find even one missing child, that’s a positive,” Williams says. Because team members had started pre-work, some of the cases were able to be swiftly closed. A side benefit, Branzetti says, is that the rescue operation helps broaden or hone skills, and participants leave with added knowledge they can apply to their own cases. “These rescue

operations turn into partial training events,” he says. “You actually may be writing a first search warrant or doing a first cell tower dump, or someone is walking you through how to track an IP address. You can’t beat that.”

The organizers also note that it’s heartening to see the camaraderie develop on the mixed teams, where members typically start out the rescue operation as strangers.

Williams says the operation proved to him how beneficial it is to bring together diverse groups. “We all tend to fall into the silo that we’re comfortable in, but we hear so many times, ‘Oh I wish I had reached out to you sooner,’” he says. “Sitting down at the same table, talking through cases, and sharing resources that are available is so important. Don’t be afraid to have those difficult conversations or continue to talk weekly or monthly to stay on top of things.”

For Neff, the rescue operation was a gratifying culmination to her long career. “When professionals from different agencies are brought together in the same room with a shared mission,” she says, “remarkable things can happen.”

[Display text]

Every time a child runs away, it’s a cry for help. That child is screaming out for our help, and it’s our job to do something.

Kevin Branzetti

CEO, National Child Protection Task Force

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Web Extra!

This rescue operation capped Cindy Neff’s long career in helping children. In April, Neff retired from the New York State Missing Persons Clearinghouse, where she worked for 20 years, the past 11 as manager. She encourages clearinghouse managers and AMBER Alert Coordinators to carry on the mission on behalf of missing children by regularly assessing priorities, and building strong partnerships. “This work cannot be done in isolation,” she says. Read the [story](#) “Empathy & Respect” about Neff on the *AMBER Advocate* website.

[Photos]

1—Photo of a dark-hair woman standing up and talking to two women, shown from the back, sitting at a table. There are stacks of papers on the table. In the background, there are large poster-size papers with writing on them taped to walls. Caption for the photo reads:

Intelligence Analyst Joy Johnston of the New York State Police answers questions during a rescue operation to locate children reported missing as runaways.

2—Photo of three men sitting at a table with laptops in front of them. The man in the center is turned to his right and talking to another man. Caption for the photo reads: Tim Williams, center, manager of the New York State Missing Persons Clearinghouse (NYSMP) checks progress with David Fallon, retired FBI investigator.

3—Photo of man with a gray beard sitting at a table in front of a laptop and ringing a small gold schoolbell with his right hand. Caption for the photo reads: Alan Lapage, NYSMPC investigative supervisor, rings a bell to signal a missing child was safely located.

3—Photo of a man wearing a blue suit jacket talking to two women. One of the women is looking down and writing on a notepad. Caption for the photo reads: Madeline Hehir of New York's Office of Children and Family Services takes notes during a conversation with the National Child Protection Task Force's Al Rollins and Melissa Kaiser.

4—Photo of a man wearing a dark suit speaking into a microphone and holding a white cup. In the background, there are people sitting at tables working on laptops. A quote in dark red type below the photo says: "Every time a child runs away, it's a cry for help. That child is screaming out for our help, and it's our job to do something." Kevin Branzetti (shown above) CEO, National Child Protection Task Force

5—Photo of two men sitting at a table looking at a laptop in front of one of the men. One man has cropped brown hair and a beard and is wearing a dark blue polo shirt. The man in front of the laptop is wearing a gray flat cap and a dark zip-up jacket. Caption for the photo reads: Left: Samuel Lizzio and Mark Baney, New York State Police senior investigators, work a case. In 2024, New York closed 12,310 cases involving children reported missing as runaways, according to the Division of Criminal Justice Services.

6—Studio photo of a woman with long blonde hair wearing a gray blazer. Information near the photo says: WEB EXTRA! This rescue operation capped Cindy Neff's long career in helping children. In April, Neff retired from the New York State Missing Persons Clearinghouse, where she worked for 20 years, the past 11 as manager. She encourages clearinghouse managers and AMBER Alert Coordinators to carry on the mission on behalf of missing children by regularly assessing priorities, and building strong partnerships. "This work cannot be done in isolation," she says. Read the story "Empathy & Respect" about Neff (pictured below) on the AMBER Advocate website.

FACES

Pedal to the metal for missing children

As the father of two teen-age boys, Lieutenant Chris O’Keefe recognizes that “every child deserves to be safe,” he says. “No matter the circumstances, when they go missing, they are profoundly vulnerable, and need to be found quickly.”

By Denise Gee Peacock

Lieutenant Chris O’Keefe of the Tulsa, Oklahoma, Police Department (TPD) has a handful of cameo appearances in the reality-crime TV series “The First 48.” But off screen, the real-life search for bad actors and innocent victims has been his calling for several decades.

Much of O’Keefe’s 24-year TPD career has focused on the rapid identification and apprehension of homicide suspects and other violent criminals, most recently in the TPD’s Fugitive Warrants Unit. In April 2023 he began supervising the TPD’s Sex and Violent Offender Registration Unit, where he also serves as AMBER Alert Coordinator (AAC). As AAC, O’Keefe weighs missing child-related factors as they are known before deciding whether to contact Jason Matheson of the Oklahoma Highway Patrol to initiate an AMBER Alert in partnership with the Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation.

We met the De Pere, Wisconsin, native at this year’s AMBER Alert and AMBER Alert in Indian Country Symposium in Washington, D.C. We reconnected with him in Tulsa to discuss his work.

What led you into law enforcement?

I knew I wanted to get into public service, something to help people on a daily basis. Maybe I just read too many superhero comic books as a kid. But after getting a B.A. in sociology from St. Norbert College in De Pere, I did some law enforcement training at Fox Valley Technical College (FVTC) in Appleton before joining the U.S. Army. Then, when my wife was offered a job in Tulsa, I tapped into my FVTC training and Army experience to sign up for the TPD academy. I joined the organization in 2001.

How does being an AAC mesh with the other work you do for the TPD?

It’s a natural fit. An AMBER Alert is essentially a manhunt, and I’ve developed an expertise in finding people. Now I oversee the process after countless directives to “Go, go, go—find them!” I also manage the sex offender registration process, and those are the individuals we look at right away whenever there’s a missing child case.

How many AMBER Alerts do you issue on average?

In the last two years, we've issued about six AMBER Alerts. But I couldn't even begin to count the number of times we've discussed if a missing child case should warrant an AMBER Alert, or an Endangered Missing Alert, or be addressed some other way.

What are your biggest challenges?

One involves a perception that if we don't issue an alert, we're ignoring the situation. But truth is, we bring plenty of resources to bear to find a child. This was a topic of conversation at the recent AMBER Alert and AMBER Alert in Indian Country Symposium. There's a lot we can do if a case doesn't meet our criteria—issue social media posts, work with license plate readers, ping a cell phone. The case can get resolved even quicker if we have solid information to work with right away.

What guides your ultimate decision?

I go by informed instinct, combining that with what I hear from people on the front lines—particularly the responding officers or in some cases our dispatchers, digging into what their first impression of the situation is, and whether they believe the child to be in danger. That's why first-responder training is essential.

Do you enlist a child abduction response team (CART)?

We have a call tree of people on our incident management team (IMT) who are paged during an AMBER Alert or Endangered Missing situation, and the IMT includes a crisis unit that focuses on child molestation cases. They're truly an organizational force. We have an AMBER Alert Center within our headquarters and the IMT will use it as its command post, manning the phones, sorting through tips, procuring resources. All the tips flow through me and I decide the priority of them. We then keep track of who we've sent where to check out the tip, and I organize all that. We also try to keep the family as close as possible and have a victim advocate on hand.

What types of missing child cases are the most complex?

Stranger abductions—the real nightmare ones, with no information on vehicles or suspects—are thankfully very rare. Parental abductions are the most common—and complicated. Generally, a parent can't abduct their child if they have the legal right to be with that child, whether all the time or just some of the time. It's only when the parent says they're going to go harm themselves and/or the child that we immediately know it warrants an AMBER Alert.

What helps you navigate such complexities?

If there's even a chance that a parent could hurt the child, we'll err on the side of caution and

issue an AMBER Alert. The challenge lies within the legalities. We worry about unleashing the full force of law enforcement on a parent who hasn't committed any crime. That can result in liability issues. And that's where our training and experience have to come into play—and asking the right questions.

Being an AAC is stressful work. What motivates or inspires you?

The times we've had AMBER Alerts I'm never short of help. It's not just from the people on call; we see that every patrol officer is going to stop what they're doing to help find the child. I also get calls from the regional sheriff's department, Oklahoma Highway Patrol, FBI, and the U.S. Marshals. It's amazing. I'm also grateful to have a family that's been supportive of my work.

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"Parental abductions are the most common and complex. We have to be careful with custody disputes—unless the parent indicates he might hurt the child. At that point, an AMBER Alert would be clear."

Lieutenant Chris O'Keefe

Tulsa Police Department

Sex and Violent Offender Registration

Supervisor/AMBER Alert Coordinator

[Display text]

"If it were our child who was missing, we would want everyone available doing everything possible."

Chris O'Keefe

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See Lt. O'Keefe in 'The First 48.' Click [here](#) for S17/E29 and [here](#) for S21/E1.

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Tactical Tip

"The U.S. Marshals are a great resource," says O'Keefe, who has served on several U.S. Marshals Service (USMS) task forces. "At the recent [National AMBER Alert] symposium, Bill Boldin explained how they're using their fugitive-search skills to find missing children. I hope people use them more. They're always quick to offer their help to us, especially when we lack resources to conduct out-of-state investigations."

[Photos/captions]

1—Photo of man wearing a dark polo shirt with a badge-like law enforcement emblem toward his top left shoulder. The man is turned slightly toward his right and is looking at the camera. A photo identification placed on the lower right corner of the photo says: Lieutenant Chris O’Keefe.

2—Graphic illustration of an old-school console TV set on legs and with a wire antenna coming out of the top. The information with it says: See Lt. O’Keefe in ‘The First 48.’ Click [here](#) for S17/E29 and [here](#) for S21/E1.

3—Photo of four people in an office, with a desk, shelves filled with three-ring binders and folders, and a computer in the background. A man wearing a green baseball-style hat and black zip-up hooded sweatshirt, and with some type of phone, pager, or walkie-talkie attached to a belt or the pocket of his blue jeans, is holding several pieces of paper, and pointing to one of the papers. A silver-hair man sitting in a chair wearing a light-color dress shirt and tie is looking at the piece of paper the man is pointing to. A dark-hair man wearing gray pants and a white dress shirt with a tie and a woman in a brown jacket and pants are standing in the background looking at the two men discussing the paper. A caption for the photo reads: O’Keefe discusses an arrest warrant with his TPD colleagues.

4—Photo of what appears to be taken from some type of video footage. Photo shows a side view of a man sitting behind the steering wheel of a vehicle; a road and trees are visible outside the driver’s side window. The man is wearing a baseball-style hat and what appears to be a black soft armor vest that says “Police” across the chest. A graphic on the lower left side of the photo has the words “Time Remaining” and “38:14:51.” A caption for the photo reads: Chris O’Keefe appeared in several episodes of the A&E series “The First 48” driving fast, procuring warrants, and arresting violent criminals. Because of his expertise he’s now a driving instructor for the Tulsa Police Department (TPD). “It can be a little hairy sometimes teaching other people how to drive fast when you’re sitting in the passenger seat.”

NEWS BRIEFS: UNITED STATES

Security camera captures thwarted abduction

More than a dozen Good Samaritans are being called heroes after rescuing two children, ages 2 and 6 months, and their mother, from a vehicle fleeing a Jacksonville, Florida, parking lot. Video [footage](#) released by the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office (JSO) shows bystanders rushing forward and safely pulling the woman and a child, who were being dragged by the vehicle, and the other child from the SUV. Witnesses provided a detailed vehicle description that led to the driver's arrest at a shopping center. "The situation could have ended in tragedy," a JSO social media post stated. "Your JSO is grateful for the quick action and bravery of the Good Samaritans who stepped up." The driver, Yanni Human, 26, faces multiple felony charges including child abuse and false imprisonment.

Texas event provides resources for families

For 11 years, "Missing in Southeast Texas Day" has been bringing resources to families with missing loved ones. During this year's [event](#) in Houston, dozens of families made connections with law enforcement, social services, and forensics experts dedicated to locating missing persons. Family members were able to provide DNA samples, enter [information](#) into the National Missing & Unidentified Persons System (NamUs), and file photos and other identifying documents. Texas Center for the Missing organizers say the goal is to reduce the number of individuals buried as unknowns due to lack of a missing person report and give families closure. The Houston Police Department and Harris County Sheriff's Office were among the partners of the free event.

Abducted toddler found alive after 25 years

"No cold case is ever truly closed." So said New Haven, Connecticut, Police Chief Karl Jacobson in crediting officers and detectives for their diligence in reinvestigating the cold case of a toddler [abducted](#) by her mother. For 25 years, officers knew Andrea Michelle Reyes only by a [photo](#) of a smiling dark-haired child in a pink-checked outfit. Reyes was about 2 years old and under custody of her father when her mother abducted her, then was suspected of fleeing to Mexico. Two years ago, Detective Kealyn Nivakoff began to [reinvestigate](#) the case. Through interviews, search warrants, and social media, she was able to connect with Reyes in the Mexican city of Puebla. Subsequently, Reyes contacted the man she believed to be her father, who had searched tirelessly for her since the 1999 abduction. Advanced DNA testing confirmed the familial relationship. An arrest warrant for the mother, Rosa Tenorio, remains valid in the United States; she is believed to be in Mexico.

NEWS BRIEFS: INTERNATIONAL

Lost Person Behavior expert discusses wooded searches after two girls go missing

A search for two young siblings missing in a heavily wooded area near their Nova Scotia home prompted the Canadian Broadcast Corporation to tap Robert Koester, author and app creator of Lost Person Behavior, for insight on what search-and-rescue teams face. Koester, who is also a search mission coordinator with the Virginia Department of Emergency Management, said the first thing searchers need to consider are the basics of a solid investigation, such as the child's age, scenario, timeline, and what caused them to go missing. Searchers can apply that information to [statistics](#) to identify high probability areas. For example, half of lost 4- to 6-year-olds—the ages of the missing siblings—are typically found less than one-half mile away, Koester said. Among his insights: Be aware that a child may not shout back when a searcher is shouting their name and may actively hide because they may be afraid or think they're in trouble. Thick underbrush "may look impenetrable to you as the adult searcher standing up at five feet. But if you're down at between one and three feet, you may see a way to scramble underneath ... So all those places need to be searched," Koester said.

State Department releases annual report on International Parental Child Abduction

Law enforcement officials wanting to stay updated on the issue of International Parental Child Abduction (IPCA) can glean the latest information from the U.S. Department of State's 2025 [annual report](#). The report, which was submitted to Congress, discusses compliance with The [Hague Convention](#) on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. That treaty provides a framework for cooperation between countries to promptly return a child wrongfully removed or retained across international borders and to help ensure custody rights. The report uses standards set by the Sean and David Goldman International Child Abduction Prevention and Return Act of 2014 (known as "[the Goldman Act](#)") to evaluate countries on their performance. A foreword in the report notes that Georgia was welcomed as a new treaty partner in 2024.

New protocols lauded, credited for solving missing persons cases in Guyana

Changes in how the Guyana Police Force responds to missing persons reports are delivering results, with a stepped-up focus on children. Three missing persons cases were reported to be [resolved](#) about a week after new emergency protocols went into effect in late April. The revised procedures enable a faster, more coordinated national response to missing persons reports. Reports involving missing children are automatically categorized as high risk and

automatically trigger a “Red Alert” that activates a coordinated national response. All missing persons cases now receive [immediate](#) response, eliminating the 24-hour waiting period previously in place. Additionally, police officers work closely with the Guyana’s Child Care and Protection Agency and other key entities. The changes stem from an 11-year-old girl’s drowning in a hotel swimming pool.

NEWS BRIEFS: INDIAN COUNTRY

Arizona, New Mexico approve 'Turquoise Alert'

The disappearance and murder of a 14-year-old girl prompted Arizona lawmakers to pass ["Emily's Law,"](#) establishing a new emergency alert for missing Indigenous persons. The Arizona Legislature had been considering a "Turquoise Alert" system when Emily Pike, a San Carlos Apache teen, was found murdered after she was reported missing from a group home in late January. Her case prompted lawmakers to amend the original bill to include minors under the age of 18 and name the legislation in her memory. "We cannot let children go missing without somebody being alerted," said Rep. Teresa Martinez, the bill's sponsor. The Arizona measure follows closely on the heels of a "Turquoise Alert" the [New Mexico](#) Legislature unanimously passed. The alerts, which function similar to an AMBER Alert, provide a rapid response when an Indigenous person is reported missing and there is evidence of imminent danger. Washington, California, and Colorado have similar alerts.

FBI surges resources in 'Operation Not Forgotten'

The FBI is surging resources to investigate unsolved cases in Indian Country, including those relating to missing and murdered Indigenous persons (MMIP). As part of "Operation Not Forgotten," 60 FBI agents will be temporarily [deployed](#) to 10 field offices nationwide to work in partnership with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and Tribal law enforcement agencies across jurisdictions. The BIA's Missing and Murdered Unit and the FBI will use advanced forensic technology in their efforts. The FBI's Indian Country program had about 4,300 open investigations at the beginning of fiscal year 2025. U.S. Attorney General Pamela Bondi said that the collaboration will "help deliver the accountability that these communities deserve." This is the third deployment under the operation, which has provided investigative support to more than 500 cases in the past two years and resulted in the recovery of 10 child victims and 52 arrests. Frank Star Comes Out, President of the Oglala Sioux Tribe in South Dakota, said he welcomes the additional [resources](#), but added "we're not done yet."

Diné task force undertakes training

The Missing & Murdered Diné Relatives (MMDR) Task Force continues to ramp up training initiatives as part of its strategy to combat the crisis of missing and murdered people across Navajo Nation. The Arizona group recently met with representatives of AMBER Alert in Indian Country (AIIC), part of the AMBER Alert Training & Technical Assistance Program (AATTAP), to [review](#) updates and information about the [Ashlynnne Mike](#) AMBER Alert in Indian Country Act. It also learned more about AATTAP's Child Abduction Tabletop Exercise ([CATE](#)), a tool that helps communities strengthen

emergency response capabilities. MMDR Task Force Chair Amber Kanazbah Crotty called the presentation “a commitment to action, to justice, and to protecting our children and families.” The [task force](#) is collaborating with AIIC to schedule a series of training sessions to help Tribal law enforcement officials, educators, and community members be better prepared in cases of missing Indigenous children. It plans to integrate AIIC training programs into its regular meetings.