

Testimony of
Mr. Joe Farrow

September 4, 2002

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and Committee members. My name is Joseph Farrow, Deputy Commissioner of the California Highway Patrol. It is an honor to appear before you this morning to discuss California's Child Safety AMBER Network, which has contributed to the safe recovery of 15 abducted children in the State of California this summer. Our comprehensive AMBER program is a great source of pride for Governor Gray Davis, the California Highway Patrol, and all law enforcement agencies throughout our state.

According to the Department of Justice, three quarters of children who were abducted, and later found murdered, were killed within three hours of being taken. This troubling statistic highlights the need for the immediate dissemination of pertinent information to law enforcement agencies, media outlets, and the public.

Given that California is a large state with an extensive system of highways, we have tried to design a system that addresses our particular communication needs. Using our effective "Changeable Message Signs" and our "Highway Advisory Radio" system, we now transmit information to the motoring public regarding a confirmed child abduction case, which has proven invaluable in the realization of our basic and most fundamental goal, the safe return of our children.

As many know, efforts to develop and disseminate the tools for states to respond rapidly to stranger abductions have been underway for a few years now. The original "Amber" Alert Program was named after 9 year-old Amber Hagerman who was abducted and murdered in Arlington, Texas, in 1996. Following this incident, the state of Texas developed a regional plan, which encouraged law enforcement agencies to alert media outlets following any confirmed child abduction.

Shortly thereafter, California began to implement a regional system, which we call the Child Abduction Regional Emergency Alert (CARE) involving a number of our counties.

Then, in the Fall of 2001, the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) launched the AMBER (America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response) plan nationwide to assist cities and towns across the United States with creating their own emergency alert plan.

Recently, Governor Davis joined with the Polly Klaas Foundation to offer assistance to other states to take the necessary steps to implement an AMBER program in their state, and progress is being made. The number of statewide programs has recently grown to 18, with well over 50 regional and local programs around the country.

Unfortunately, we don't always realize our ultimate goal. On July 15th of this year, 5 year-old Samantha Runnion was abducted in Orange County, California, following which the local

AMBER program was activated. Immediately following her abduction, a local alert was broadcast. Information regarding Samantha and her abductor was quickly disseminated throughout the region to law enforcement agencies, media outlets and the public. Tragically Samantha was not brought home safely in this incident. However, the prompt release of information to the public resulted in thousands of tips from the community, which ultimately led to the timely apprehension of the suspect.

A few weeks later, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department requested an AMBER alert in response to the abduction of two teenage girls in Lancaster California. The suspect's vehicle information was immediately broadcast throughout the state via hundreds of changeable message signs, leading to thousands of tips, two of which actually led to finding the abductor and the safe return of the girls.

The circumstances in these incidents highlight the importance of a cooperative effort among law enforcement agencies, media outlets, and the public in responding to incidents of child abduction.

The nucleus of California's AMBER alert network is the Emergency Alert System, which can, with media assistance, temporarily pre-empt radio and television broadcasts and provide information to the public regarding a child abduction incident. To capture the attention of the public, the emergency messages are to be preceded and concluded with alert tones.

In developing the California Child Safety AMBER Network, Governor Davis directed the California Highway Patrol to serve as the centralized point-of-contact for the statewide activation of the Emergency Alert System and dissemination of child abduction information. The California Highway Patrol now possesses the equipment and broadcast capabilities to assist local law enforcement agencies with statewide or multi-regional activation of the Emergency Alert System.

The goal of our program is to bring the eyes and ears of millions of California residents together with law enforcement officials to maximize search efforts and ensure the safe recovery of abducted children. However, California's AMBER alerts will not normally be initiated for parental abductions unless it is determined that the child faces serious bodily injury or death. To ensure the public remains sensitive to activation of the system, an AMBER alert will only be initiated in California when the investigating law enforcement agency has confirmed all of the following:

First, that an abduction has occurred. This may be accomplished with witness verification and/or an investigation to eliminate alternative explanations for a child's absence.

Second, that the victim of the abduction is 17 years of age or younger, or has a proven mental or physical disability.

Third, that the victim is in imminent danger of serious bodily injury or death.

Last, that there is information available that, if disseminated to the public, can assist in the safe recovery of the victim or apprehension of the suspect.

The California Highway Patrol created a notification center which operates 24-hours a day, seven days per week and can assist local law enforcement agencies with the immediate initiation of statewide AMBER alerts at any time. As a statewide law enforcement agency with more than 10,000 personnel and 115 local offices, the California Highway Patrol also has the resources to coordinate with local agencies anywhere in California.

California's system also activates the "Emergency Digital Information Service." The Emergency Digital Information Service was created in 1989 following the Loma Prieta earthquake to improve communications and serve as a simple, comprehensive means to get detailed emergency information to the public. The service provides local, state and federal law enforcement agencies with a direct computer link to media outlets and other agencies. Text messages may be sent via the state's Law Enforcement Telecommunications System, while images and graphics may be sent over the Internet. Emergency Digital Information Service messages provide all relevant information regarding a child abduction, such as child information, suspect, and vehicle, descriptions to other law enforcement agencies throughout the state and the media. This information can also be disseminated through text pagers to law enforcement officials and media representatives.

Another tool we use is a computer based system called "Technology to Recover Abducted Kids," or also known as TRAK. TRAK technology is an image based system linking state, county, and local law enforcement agencies. The TRAK system can capture and immediately distribute color photographs and images to thousands of law enforcement agencies, media outlets, hospitals and private organizations. There are approximately 1,228 systems being used by various law enforcement agencies in 32 states. California alone has a total of 488 TRAK terminal systems.

Finally, we incorporate "Internet Sites" as part of our alert system. Child abduction information, photographs and descriptions can be posted on Internet sites, including the California Highway Patrol media web page that is accessed by media outlets throughout the state.

We are learning much in our role as statewide coordinators for rapid response to child abduction cases. We continue to improve our system with deployment of additional TRAK systems, upgrades of alerting technologies, and training for law enforcement, media and the public. We have found that partnerships with local child abduction groups, media outlets, and organized highway user groups such as the California State Automobile Association and commercial trucking industry are key to a successful alerting system. We also recognize that we are very fortunate to have a governor and congressional delegation that care about this issue and have provided us with the resources needed to rapidly consolidate and expand this program, along with the personnel to staff our statewide notification center.

The California Child Safety AMBER Network should be considered in developing a national model. Although the Emergency Alert System is a nationwide system which can and should be used as a part of any child abduction notification process, we believe a comprehensive program which utilizes a variety of resources is critical to the development of any successful child abduction notification system. A national coordinator of Amber Alert programs could prove beneficial, assuming they coordinate and do not mandate. The role of the coordinator should be shaped with the input and assistance of state law enforcement Amber Alert coordinators.

Let me close with reference to one of the more recent success stories involving the abduction of Nichole Timmons, a 12 year-old girl from Riverside, California. In this case, a cooperative effort among community members, the California Highway Patrol, local law enforcement agencies, and neighboring states was vital in her recovery.

Nichole's case began as every parent's worst nightmare. Nichole's mother woke up and discovered her daughter missing from her bedroom. The Riverside Police Department requested the California Highway Patrol to activate an AMBER alert using our changeable message signs and also provide TRAK bulletins and suspect information to adjoining states. As a result of these efforts, media outlets immediately began broadcasting the information. A hotel owner in Hawthorne, Nevada, observed the suspect's vehicle on Highway 95 and alerted authorities. The AMBER alert, and quick action by the public and law enforcement, resulted in the safe recovery of Nichole and apprehension of her abductor. For those of us in law enforcement, we could not have felt more proud that day in working so closely with the media and our communities to do what we do best - keeping Californians safe.

Incidents such as these highlight the benefit of a statewide, and in this case interstate, notification system to recover abducted children. In California, this program is intended to unite all of our residents in the search for an abducted child. When a child is abducted, and an AMBER alert is initiated, every parent, media representative, police officer, highway worker, and member of the community are called to action. Although a comprehensive nationwide notification system cannot always guarantee a safe recovery in every instance, it significantly increases our chances of a safe and timely recovery. In short, we have an obligation to use every resource available in a coordinated and cooperative fashion to ensure the safety of our most precious resource: our children.

Mr. Chairman, I thank you for the opportunity to testify before you and this distinguished Committee. I would be pleased to answer any questions you might have.