

Testimony of  
**The Honorable Patrick Leahy**

September 4, 2002

I am proud to be an original co-sponsor of this legislation to enhance the operation of the AMBER Alert communications network in order to aid the recovery of abducted children, and to provide for enhanced notification on highways of alerts and information on these missing children. I commend Senator Hutchison and Senator Feinstein for their leadership in introducing the National AMBER Alert Network Act of 2002.

I want to recognize the members of the Judiciary Committee who are cosponsors of this bipartisan bill: Ranking Republican Member Hatch, and Senators Biden, Durbin, Edwards, and Kyl. In total, this bill has already garnered 24 co-sponsors from both sides of the aisle.

It is disturbing to see on TV or in the newspapers photo after photo of missing children from every corner of the nation. As the father of three children, as well as a grandfather of one grandson with another grandchild on the way, I know that an abducted child is a parent or grandparent's worst nightmare.

Unfortunately, it appears this nightmare is happening all too often. Indeed, the Justice Department estimates that the number of children taken by strangers annually is between 3,000 and 4,000. These parents and grandparents, as well as the precious children, deserve the assistance of the American people and helping hand of the Congress.

The AMBER Plan was created as a reaction the kidnapping and brutal murder of 9-year-old Amber Hagerman of Arlington, Texas. By coordinating their efforts, law enforcement, emergency management and transportation agencies, radio and television stations, and cable systems have worked to develop an innovative early warning system to help find abducted children by broadcasting information - including descriptions and pictures of the missing child, the suspected abductor, a suspected vehicle, and any other information available and valuable to identifying the child and suspect - to the public as speedily as possible.

The AMBER Alert system's popularity has raced across the United States - since the original AMBER Plan was established in 1996, 55 modified versions have been adopted at local, regional, and statewide levels. Eighteen states have a statewide plan. It is also a proven success - to date the AMBER Plan has been credited with recovering 30 children.

As authorized by this bipartisan legislation, the Attorney General, in cooperation with the Secretary of Transportation and the Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), shall appoint a National AMBER Alert Coordinator to oversee the Alert's communication network regarding abducted children. The AMBER Alert Coordinator at the Department of Justice will work with states, broadcasters, and law enforcement agencies to set up AMBER plans, serve as a point of contact to supplement existing AMBER plans, and facilitate appropriate regional coordination of AMBER alerts.

This legislation also directs the AMBER Alert Coordinator, in conjunction with the FCC, local broadcasters, and local law enforcement agencies, to establish voluntary guidelines for minimum standards in determining the criteria for AMBER alerts and for the dissemination of those alerts. As a result, our bipartisan bill helps kidnap victims while preserving flexibility for States in implementing the Alert system.

Because developing and enhancing the AMBER Alert system is a costly endeavor for States to take on alone, our bill establishes two Federal grant programs to share the burden. First, the bill creates a Federal grant program, under the direction of the Secretary of Transportation for statewide notification and communications systems, including electronic message boards and road signs, along highways for the recovery of abducted children. Second, the bill establishes a grant program managed by the Attorney General for the support of AMBER Alert communications plans with law enforcement agencies and others in the community.

Our nation's children, parents and grandparents deserve our help to stop the disturbing trend of children abductions. The AMBER Alert National Network Act of 2002 will ensure that our communications systems help rescue abducted children from their kidnappers and return them safely to their families.

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