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ROD BLAGOJEVICH - GOVERNOR

NEWS

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Blagojevich announces key partnership to increase efforts to recover missing children

National Weather Service and Broadcasters sign-on to strengthen AMBER Alert

CHICAGO – Gov. Rod R. Blagojevich today announced improvements to Illinois’ child-abduction alert system that will make it one of the strongest in the nation.

Known as the AMBER Alert system, the governor said a new partnership with the Illinois Broadcasters Association and National Weather Service will enable the Illinois State Police to send information on missing or abducted children to radio and television outlets throughout the state for immediate broadcast.

“The National Weather Service and the state’s broadcasters have agreed to help us make an important program even better,” said Blagojevich. “With their help, we will now be able to alert the public almost immediately when a child disappears. This provides yet another means to help recover a missing child quickly and safely.”

Blagojevich was joined in making the announcement at the 1st District Police Station on Chicago’s south side by representatives from the Illinois Broadcasters Association, Illinois State Police, Illinois Toll Highway Authority, Illinois Department of Transportation and National Weather Service.

The new system will allow law enforcement to send AMBER Alerts using the Emergency Alert System (EAS), which also delivers emergency storm warnings, to television and radio newsrooms. Stations will then be able to insert a pre-recorded message directly into broadcasts, which will include details about the missing child and the abduction. The new system will also have the ability to target alerts to the region of the state where the child was reported missing or abducted.

“This is a common sense way that we can use existing technology to improve a critical system,” Blagojevich said.

AMBER Alerts are issued when a child under the age of 16 or person with mental or physical disabilities is reported missing, and the police have reason to believe the child is in danger of serious bodily harm or death.

Currently, when information is received about a missing or abducted child, local law enforcement officials contact the Illinois State Police, who then work with the Illinois Emergency Management Agency to send a fax to 180 major broadcasters statewide. In addition, electronic notification signs are posted on the state's tollways and highways.

Once the new system is operational, the Illinois State Police will be able to target any of the state's 1,100 broadcasters with the message and more efficiently focus their outreach in the area where the abduction took place. In addition, the new system's use of the EAS audio alert to newsrooms will ensure that AMBER Alerts do not sit unnoticed on broadcasters' fax machines.

An AMBER Alert issued in Pennsylvania last weekend helped law enforcement officials locate and recover a 13-year old girl and her abductor. The girl had been taken from her home the night before, after the abductor allegedly killed both of her parents. Before the girl's father died, he was able to identify the abductor. Local law enforcement officials who had been tipped off by the AMBER Alert chased the abductor and safely recovered the girl.

"We know that locating missing children in the first few hours after their disappearance significantly increases the chances of a safe recovery," said Larry Trent, director of the Illinois State Police. "By partnering to maximize our outreach when a child is discovered missing, we will hopefully prevent future tragedies."

At today's press conference, Blagojevich also unveiled plans to set up a computerized AMBER Alert system, enabling the state police to email alerts to broadcasters and instantly update the Illinois State Police website with photographs and new information on abduction cases for other law enforcement agencies, the media and the general public. In addition, all AMBER Alert notices will be posted at www.illinois.gov, the state's website, and linked to the details on the state police website.

Both the website database and the new broadcast alert system are expected to be up and running by early summer.

"We're going to use every tool available to recover children quickly. In minutes, we will be able to fax and email notices to as many as 1,100 broadcasters who can disseminate the information to the public quickly. In the same move, we will provide law enforcement officials with the information they need to search for missing children," said Blagojevich.

The AMBER Alert system has been activated four times in Illinois since it was implemented on January 31, 2002. In three of those cases the abducted child was safely recovered.

AMBER Alerts are named in memory of a Texas girl, Amber Hagerman, who was abducted and killed in 1996. AMBER also is an acronym for America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response.