

# Governor Blagojevich Encourages Illinoisans to "Light The Way Home" for Missing Children



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## Proclaims May 25 Missing Children's Day in Illinois

### Illinois Press Association joins AMBER Task Force

SPRINGFIELD, IL – Governor Rod R. Blagojevich, along with members of the Illinois AMBER Task Force and the Department of Children and Family Services, joined people throughout the state in observing today, May 25, as Missing Children's Day in Illinois. "Light the Way Home" is an opportunity for family and friends to plan events in their communities to raise public awareness about the serious issue of missing children. "The number of missing children in Illinois has decreased from last year," said Gov. Blagojevich. "Unfortunately, we still have more than 2,000 children missing in Illinois. I hope people all over the state will join together in 'Lighting the Way Home' for missing kids. Turn on your headlights when you're driving, switch on your porch light to symbolize your commitment to finding these children. And throughout the year, let's all remain vigilant and engaged in our communities and help us return kids to safety."

The Blagojevich Administration has implemented several initiatives that improve coordination among law enforcement and other agencies when it comes to locating and recovering missing children. In April of 2003, Governor Blagojevich enhanced the AMBER Alert Plan with the creation of the Illinois AMBER Task Force, which partners with the National Weather Service and the Broadcasters Association to send information on a missing or abducted child to radio and television outlets throughout the state for immediate broadcast.

At an event with the Illinois State Police, the Illinois Press Association (IPA) also announced today that it has joined the AMBER Task Force in an effort to help find missing and endangered children.

According to IPA Executive Director Dave Bennett, "Missing children are sometimes missing for weeks and months before being found. While broadcast alerts may help create urgency, newspapers can help sustain a search with timely, detailed information."

In addition, more newspapers are offering Web sites that can be updated with the same urgency as radio and television.

Illinois, in a partnership with Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Missouri, Wisconsin, Nebraska, North and South Dakota, Minnesota and Ohio, is also active in the Interstate Agreement on Missing and Exploited Children. The agreement was established as a network to improve identifying and recovering missing children. The Council is comprised of representatives of state law enforcement and criminal justice agencies from each of these states and meets annually.

During 2005, the AMBER Alert system was activated 13 times, and so far in 2006, it has been activated three times. Since January 2002, there have been 16 successful recoveries of children.

"Losing your child is every parents' worst nightmare," said Illinois State Police Director Larry G. Trent. "Tragically, for thousands of families, the terror goes on for weeks, months, even years. As we observe Missing Children's Day in Illinois, we reaffirm our strong commitment to finding these missing children. Our hope is that through greater public awareness, we can locate all missing children and prevent future child abductions and exploitation."

The Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), which is responsible for the care of children taken into state custody, has also focused its energy on reducing the number of children who run away from care. In November 2003, DCFS established a Missing Child Unit. At that time there were 339 missing children in state care and today, the number has decreased to 258. DCFS created a database in mid-2003 that includes vital information and photos of every child in the state's care, and has hired law enforcement liaison Roberta Bartik, a 30-year Chicago Police Department veteran, to further strengthen the agency's efforts to find missing children.

"All of these resources have combined to reduce the number of missing children in state care, plus DCFS is able to recover children significantly faster now. The average number of days on the run in 2001 was 238, but the average now is 44 days," says DCFS Director Bryan Samuels. "We're also improving services that will help prevent youth from going on the run in the first place, because research shows first-time runners often become chronic runners."

On Missing Children's Day, the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) will display messages on its permanent changeable message boards. The signs will read "Missing Children's Day/Light the way Home/Turn on your headlights." The message will be displayed on all message boards except those being used for real-time traffic information such as lane closures, detours, congestion information, etc., or for an AMBER Alert.

"A missing child is every parents' nightmare, and our agency stands willing to help in any way," said IDOT Secretary Timothy W. Martin. "At IDOT we're proud of our involvement in the AMBER Alert system and I urge all motorists to join in observance of this day by turning on their headlights to help show the way home."

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