

agencies and other interests, and should conform to the recommendations of the National Amber Plan Program.

Information about the National Amber Plan Program may be found at the following url: <http://www.missingkids.com/html/amberplan.html>. The general criteria for issuing an Alert and the associated procedures may include confirmation that a child has been abducted; belief that the circumstances surrounding the abduction indicate that the child is in danger of serious bodily harm or death, and enough descriptive information about the child, abductor, and/or suspect's vehicle to believe an immediate broadcast alert will help.

Of specific interest to the U.S. DOT are that these policies and procedures provide specific guidance on displaying Amber Alert or child abduction messages on CMS. Such guidance should address items such as the criteria when CMS will be used for Amber Alerts; clear identification of the law enforcement agency responsible for issuing the alert; which agencies, interests, and persons are to be contacted to initiate or call off an Amber Alert; circumstances under which the Amber Alert message could or could not be displayed; length of time to display the message; geographic area over which the information is to be displayed; circumstances that would cause the discontinuation of use of the CMS if the Amber Alert message creates an adverse traffic impact; and format and content of the messages to be displayed.

In general, the Amber Plan Program has proven to be a very effective yet relatively simple and inexpensive program to implement. However, the inclusion of the transportation community and the use of various highway advisory systems such as CMS as part of an Amber Plan Program has exposed several issues that need to be addressed in order for such use to be effective and an appropriate use of the advanced technology may be appropriate.

One key issue that has broad implications beyond Amber Alerts is the lack of well established communication systems and protocols between the public safety community and the transportation community or the inability of such systems to be used for the purposes of conveying Amber Alert information among agencies. Currently most Amber Alerts are communicated to Transportation Operations Centers by telephone or facsimile. While there is no evidence that these relatively informal "low-tech" arrangements are not effective, such an informal system, dependant on simple communication

methods, certainly has the potential for problems such as missed calls, data errors, and erroneous or false alerts. Furthermore, the lack of formal communication links has larger implications for highway incident response, hazmat incidents, natural disasters, and security related events. A number of jurisdictions have identified this broader need for communication and have established communication systems among the various public safety and transportation agencies to report and coordinate response to incidents but it is not clear whether any of these systems have been used for Amber Alerts.

Another obstacle that has been identified is the lack of capability for jurisdictions to issue area wide messages on CMS or other traveler information systems. These systems are generally intended to alert motorists to a localized condition (e.g., an incident on a specific roadway). As a result, in some jurisdictions, the systems that control these signs are not capable of posting the same message on all signs across a region. The result in the case of an Amber Alert is a rather labor intensive and time consuming process to change the message on the signs one sign at a time. Currently several of these jurisdictions are exploring ways to upgrade their systems to provide such capability. This has implications for other area wide situations such as a major natural disaster or security related event where evacuation or other critical information may need to be conveyed to motorists over a broad region.

A third issue that can impact the appropriate use of CMS for Amber Alerts is the fact that many transportation operation centers are not staffed around the clock. In those cases, if an Amber Alert or other critical message needs to be posted on CMS, an off-duty operator has to be contacted by an appropriate authority so he or she can return to the operations center and post the message. Another option is to give a public safety agency the capability and authority to post such messages during off hours. In some jurisdictions, this problem has been resolved by linking operations centers and providing for the transfer of control to a designated back-up center. In some cases these back-up centers are continuously operated Transportation Operation Centers; in other cases, these are emergency response centers (e.g., police dispatch centers). In either case, both technological and institutional issues must be resolved to provide this important functionality.

Another concern is that jurisdictions must have the basic capability to

communicate such information to motorists via CMS or other traveler information systems. Currently, CMS deployment is largely limited to urban freeways, and even in some of our largest metropolitan areas, the numbers of such signs are often limited. While it is not practical to widely deploy such systems for the specific purposes of issuing Amber Alerts, there is some value to increasing our overall capability to communicate with motorists. Exploring and planning alternative methods of providing information to travelers and expanding the use of such systems for such purposes as Amber Alerts should be pursued.

Finally, there is the issue of the message to be conveyed. There is anecdotal evidence of Amber Alerts being provided by multi-panel messages containing details such as the type of vehicle, the license plate number, and the ten-digit number to call adversely impact traffic as drivers attempted to read and possibly copy all the relevant information. Clearly, it is important to ensure that these signs are properly and safely used as part of an overall effort to provide information on Amber Alerts.

Objectives of the Amber Alert Grant Program

The proposed U.S. DOT Amber Plan Grant Program will provide up to \$7 million in grants to States (including Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia) to fund the application of Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS) to facilitate the inclusion of State and local transportation agencies into existing or proposed Amber Plan Programs. The intent is to facilitate, through the use of advanced technologies, the seamless coordination between law enforcement agencies and transportation communities necessary to implement an Amber Alert using changeable message signs or other traveler information systems and to improve our overall capability of communicating Amber Alerts and other important information to motorists.

Each State (including Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia) may apply for a grant of \$125,000 for planning, coordinating and designing of systems, protocols, and message sets that support the coordination and communication necessary to issue an Amber Alert and to provide the means to communicate an Amber Alert to motorists. This funding would ensure that the notification is well designed and integrated between the law enforcement and transportation communities.

Once such planning has been completed, any remaining funds from