When a child is abducted, law enforcement must collect and disseminate accurate information about the event, the child, and the abductor. Memoranda of understanding (MOUs) for local, state, and regional AMBER Alert plans must define agency roles and responsibilities in abduction cases and establish standards for conducting timely and thorough investigations.

The National Child Search Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. 5779, 5780) requires law enforcement to immediately enter into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database every reported case involving a missing child. The intent of this law is to ensure that law enforcement disseminates as quickly as possible information vital to the recovery of a missing child. The steps for entering child abduction into NCIC are critical:

- Enter the information immediately—with NO delay. Law enforcement should enter a child into NCIC immediately without delay. The initial entry should be reviewed within one hour of entry into NCIC and verified as to the entry time, accuracy of the descriptive information of the victim and/or perpetrator, vehicle used in the abduction, and other information that could help law enforcement apprehend the perpetrator. (Information about the perpetrator should also be entered in the Wanted Person File if a warrant is issued, and the records should be linked.) Unfortunately, in some cases data about an abducted child was not entered into NCIC until hours and even days after the child's disappearance. Such delays can have disastrous consequences.

- Use the proper NCIC category. Child abduction cases should be entered into the NCIC Missing Person File in either the endangered or the involuntary category, and the child abduction (CA) flag should be entered. An NCIC number will be automatically assigned when the record is entered. The reporting agency should assign a case or originating agency case (OCA) number to the preliminary or initial investigation. Each entry of a child age 17 or under should be reviewed to ensure that the information has been entered into the appropriate category. NCIC will then send an immediate notification to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC). NCMEC call center staff will get in contact with the appropriate law enforcement agency to conduct the intake of the case and offer all available resources. The designated supervisor should also audit each entry within one hour of the initial entry to verify and authenticate each record, signature, and time.

POSTED: 08/31/2006

- If an AMBER Alert is issued, the AMBER Alert (AA) flag should be entered in the record. If the local law enforcement agency or the Criminal Justice Information Services (CJIS) Systems Agency (CSA) cannot set the flag, NCMEC should be notified immediately so that NCMEC staff can modify the NCIC record on the agency's behalf. NCMEC can be contacted at 800–843–5678 or reporting agency ORI VA007019W or <amberalerts@ncmec.org>. NCMEC will then contact the appropriate state AMBER Alert coordinator, who will be asked to approve an update of the NCIC record with an AA flag. The AA flag allows the record to reflect that the child is the subject of an AMBER-classified abduction and is vital to alerting law enforcement and to creating a national tracking system for AMBER Alert cases using the resources of NCIC.

- Add the image of the child to the record when available. When the photo is made a part of the record, law enforcement officer can view the picture of the child. The image capability can also be used to attach photos of wanted suspects (care should be taken to ensure that the miscellaneous (MIS) field clearly states that the photo is of the perpetrator), vehicles, tattoos, and other identifiers.

- Update information about the victim and suspect on an ongoing basis. Initial police reports are based on preliminary investigations, and information entered into NCIC can quickly become obsolete. Update the NCIC entry or record frequently to ensure that the most current and reliable information is shared with other law enforcement agencies. The investigator assigned to the case should review the entry to be sure the information is correct and that all available information is included. If information on the suspect or vehicle is also entered into NCIC, the records should be linked.

Strategies for Improving the Use of NCIC

Local, state, and regional AMBER Alert coordinators should pay close attention to the number and kinds of cases being entered into NCIC by law enforcement agencies in their jurisdictions. By examining the data, coordinators can quickly determine patterns and trends in the accuracy of the information being reported and then make changes in their policies and practices that will improve the quality of the data on missing children in the NCIC system.

- Evaluate the quality of preliminary investigations in all missing children cases. Most abductions that end in homicide are received initially as missing person cases. That means that investigating officers need to establish very early in the investigative process whether the child has been abducted, so that the case can be put on the best track possible for successful recovery of the child.

- Request reports of missing children entries from the FBI. Use FBI reports to analyze patterns in the use of NCIC and determine whether some cases were entered improperly. Investigators may also want to use the data to do cold-case reviews of entries more than five years old.

- Interview terminal control operators. Terminal control operators are in an excellent position to understand both the strengths and the weaknesses in the system. Because operators rely on information relayed from the responding officer, they may have particularly valuable suggestions for ensuring the quality of entries made in NCIC. They may also have ideas about the training needs of AMBER personnel.

- Use the MIS field to provide detailed information that does not fit in one of the standard NCIC fields. For example, the following information could be added to the NCIC MIS field: CHILD IS MISSING UNDER SUSPICIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES, or CHILD IS BELIEVED TO BE IN A LIFE-THREATENING SITUATION. Information on the suspect or medical alerts also can be added in the MIS field.

- Provide refresher training. Both terminal operators and investigative personnel can benefit from a review of the policies and procedures for proper entry of information into NCIC. Topics for discussion include proper coding of cases, linking entries, imaging capabilities, and proper entry of text information.

- Establish a system for issuing a formal auditing report on all missing juvenile records entered into NCIC. Review the reports to ensure that cases were entered into the correct categories on a timely basis and used the CA and/or AA flags where appropriate. Results of audits should be analyzed, and common errors should be addressed through training.

- Modify policies, procedures, and MOUs to ensure that they reflect the best policies and practices and the most effective use of NCIC. Areas to consider include responsibility for training of personnel, formal audits of NCIC records, and identification of procedural changes that will improve the use of the NCIC system.

- Educate local agency personnel. Inform them that they are to immediately accept a complaint report, verbal or written, of a missing child and to immediately enter a record in the state system and NCIC and make details of the missing person report available to the appropriate state missing person clearinghouse.

POSTED: 08/31/2006