

Montana AMBER Alert Concept of Operations

by

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INTRODUCTION

The AMBER (America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response) Alert program is a plan to facilitate the recovery of abducted children. The plan was put into place in 1996 in memory of Amber Hagerman, a 9-year old Texan who was abducted and murdered.

There are approximately 800,000 children reported missing per year. Of these, approximately 115 are victims of long-term abductions, which is the most serious. 56% of these children are generally recovered; however, 40% are killed (1).

The most critical time for these children is the first three hours that they are missing, as "the vast majority (74%) of the abducted children who are murdered are dead within three hours of the abduction (2)." There is also "typically over a two hour delay in making the initial missing child report (60%) (2)." This is where the AMBER Alert helps. After information about the missing child is confirmed and law enforcement determine that the criteria for an AMBER Alert have been met, the law enforcement agencies work with the broadcasters in the area to activate the Emergency Alert System (EAS), also used for severe weather emergencies. By doing this, the entire community will be involved in searching for the lost child, increasing the number of people looking for the child in those critical hours.

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) launched the Amber Plan nationwide in the fall of 2001 and offers help to cities, towns, and states across the U.S. with creating their own plan. So far, there are 114 Amber plans in the U.S. Fifty of these plans are statewide, 27 are regional, and 37 are local. To date, these plans have led to 204 recoveries (3).

Montana became one of the 90 AMBER Plans on February 18, 2003. During a special session of the Montana Legislature in July 2002, the Department of Justice in Montana was directed to implement an AMBER Alert Program in Montana. The Department of Justice Division of Criminal Investigation worked with the Montana Broadcasters Association, the Montana Association of Chiefs of Police, and the Montana Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association to develop the statewide AMBER Alert Program.

To initiate an AMBER Alert in Montana, the child must fit certain criteria:

- "The child must be 17 years old or younger or have a mental or physical disability.
- The child must be in imminent danger of serious danger or death.
- There must be enough descriptive information available about the child, the abductor or the suspect's vehicle to make the alert helpful to the public.
- The local sheriff's office or police department must recommend the alert (4)."

Once it is determined that the criteria have been met, an AMBER Alert is activated. In Montana, activation includes information (e.g. physical descriptions of child and abductor, motor vehicle information, and photographs) broadcast through radio, television, the Montana lottery system, and state web sites.

An effective enhancement to the plan would be use of Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS) across the state that reach the traveling public, those people who may be driving next to the abductor. ITS includes highway advisory radio (HAR), dynamic message signs (DMS), and 511, the nation's traveler information number. These types of devices are owned and operated by the

state department of transportation. This grant will help to incorporate the use of these devices into Montana's AMBER Alert Plan.

This report will discuss the operational concepts on a high level for deploying an AMBER Alert. Points to be discussed include:

- What MDT devices will be activated;
- Who will activate the MDT devices; and
- Roles and responsibilities for all MDT parties involved.

The procedures and policies document will discuss the operational concept chosen in detail.

OPERATIONAL CONCEPT

An AMBER Alert is started when a suspected child abduction occurs and local law enforcement agencies make a decision that the abduction meets the Montana “AMBER Alert” criteria. Local law enforcement will then notify the Montana Department of Justice (DOJ), which makes the ultimate decision on posting an AMBER Alert. If it meets Montana criteria, DOJ posts an alert on its web portal. When this portal is updated, it automatically updates MDT’s web page with a flashing icon, and sends an e-mail/fax/text message to a pre-determined list of agencies and public citizens across the state, including the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) Traveler Information Section and the MDT Maintenance Operations Manager.

MDT will use its Intelligent Transportation System (ITS) infrastructure to help support rescue of the child, specifically through the use of its traveler information web site, 511, dynamic message signs (DMS) and highway advisory radio (HAR). MDT will also broadcast the information over their radio system to alert maintenance and construction crews.

There are two possible operational concepts for how this information will be disseminated. The first operational concept will include mostly maintenance division dissemination of the information. This is the current way that MDT provides traveler information. The second operational concept is for headquarters dissemination of traveler information. The AMBER Alert program at MDT will begin with division dissemination, but after central DMS software is purchased, will change to headquarters operation.

Division Operation

The diagram for this operational concept is shown in Figure 1. The email/text message received by the MDT Traveler Information Section will not only inform them of an AMBER Alert, but will automatically set up the AMBER Alert information on the MDT traveler information web site. The Traveler Information Section will update the 511 uninterruptible alert system to provide pertinent information on the AMBER Alert.

During normal business hours the Traveler Information Section will then call each of MDT’s 10 maintenance divisions. If the alert occurs after hours or on weekends during the winter, the Traveler Information Section will call the 5 MDT districts and if the alert occurs after hours or on the weekend during the summer, the Traveler Information Section will be responsible for deploying the information. (Note that if the Traveler Information Section is responsible for deploying the information, only 511 and the highway advisory radio will be deployed as the dynamic message signs and staff radio do not have central communications)

The divisions/districts will then activate the dynamic message signs and highway advisory radio broadcasts accordingly. After the devices have been activated, the divisions will then radio all maintenance and construction personnel to alert them of the AMBER Alert. As these workers are on the roadways and possibly stopping vehicles for construction, they will lend valuable extra sets of eyes (At any given time, the Montana Department of Transportation may have staff from 123 maintenance sections, 60 construction crews, 20 roving motor carrier service officers, and 70 scale houses on the roadways). Once the AMBER Alert ends, the same chain of communication is used to clear messages.

The roles and responsibilities for this operational concept are listed in Table 1.

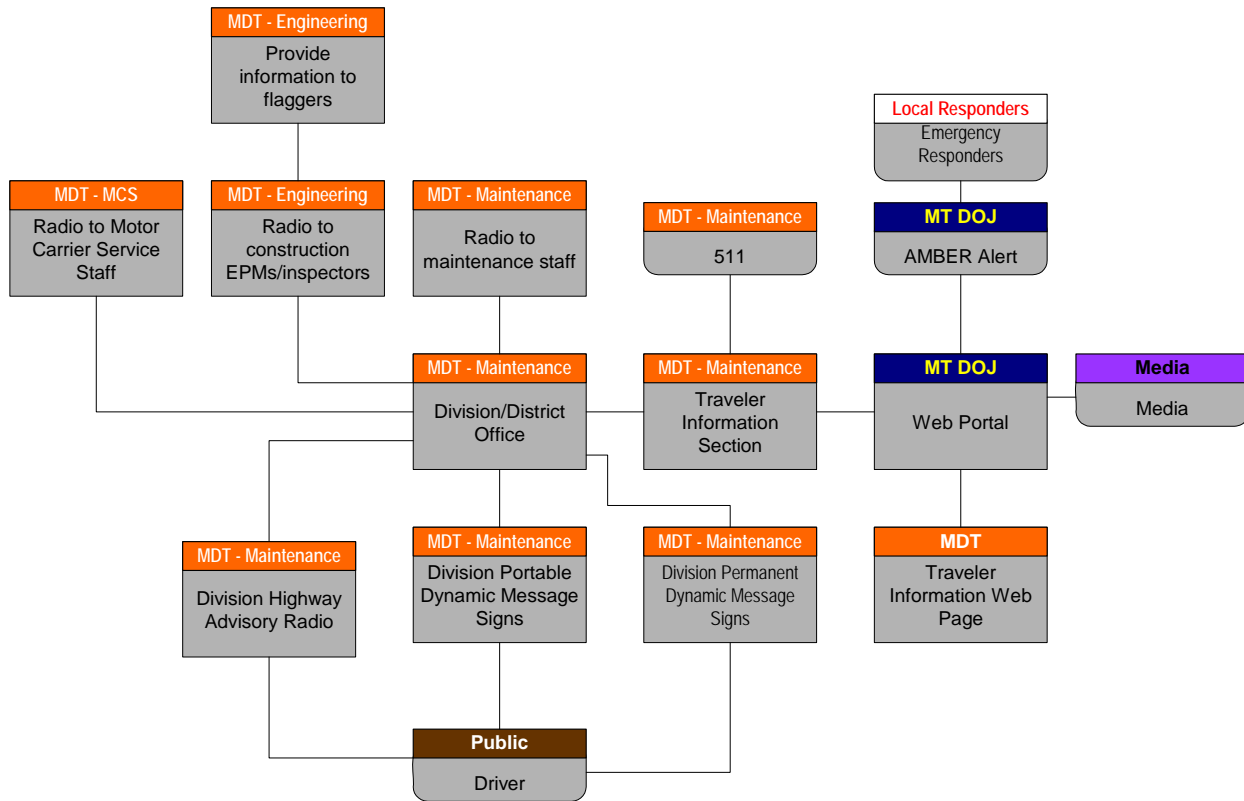


Figure 1: Division Operation of ITS for Montana AMBER Alert.

Table 1: Division AMBER Alert Operational Concept, Roles and Responsibilities.

Stakeholder	Responsibility
Department of Justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiates and terminates an AMBER Alert • Notifies MDT and other authorities • Sends an e-mail/fax/text message to list of media and local emergency responders
MDT Traveler Information Section	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Updates 511 system when AMBER Alert starts/stops • Calls divisions to post AMBER Alert messages on DMS, HAR, and over radio system
MDT Traveler Information Web Site	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indicates an AMBER Alert is in progress (high-visibility flashing logo)
MDT 511	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indicates an AMBER Alert is in progress (non-interruptible message at the beginning of a 511 call)
MDT Division Office	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post/remove AMBER messages on DMS, HAR, and over radio system • Locate portable DMS, if possible, to facilitate in AMBER Alert message
DMS and HAR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indicates an AMBER Alert is in progress (messages on sign/radio)
Maintenance crews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Receive start/stop information on an AMBER Alert and watch for possible suspects driving in area
Construction Project Managers/Inspectors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Receive start/stop information on an AMBER Alert and watch for possible suspects driving in area • Provide information to the flaggers in the construction area so they can watch as vehicles are stopped
Motor Carrier Service Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Receive start/stop information on an AMBER Alert and watch for possible suspects driving in area

Headquarters Operation

The diagram for this operational concept is shown in Figure 2. The email/text message received by the MDT Traveler Information Section will not only inform them of an AMBER Alert, but will automatically set up the AMBER Alert information on the MDT traveler information web site. The Traveler Information Section will update the 511 uninterruptible alert system to provide

pertinent information on the AMBER Alert. The Traveler Information Section will then activate the dynamic message signs and highway advisory radio broadcasts accordingly. After the devices have been activated, the Traveler Information Section will inform the Maintenance Divisions of the AMBER Alert and the Divisions will then radio all maintenance and construction personnel to alert them of the AMBER Alert. As these workers are on the roadways and possibly stopping vehicles for construction, they will lend valuable extra sets of eyes. Once the AMBER Alert ends, the same chain of communication is used to clear messages.

The roles and responsibilities for this operational concept are listed in Table 2.

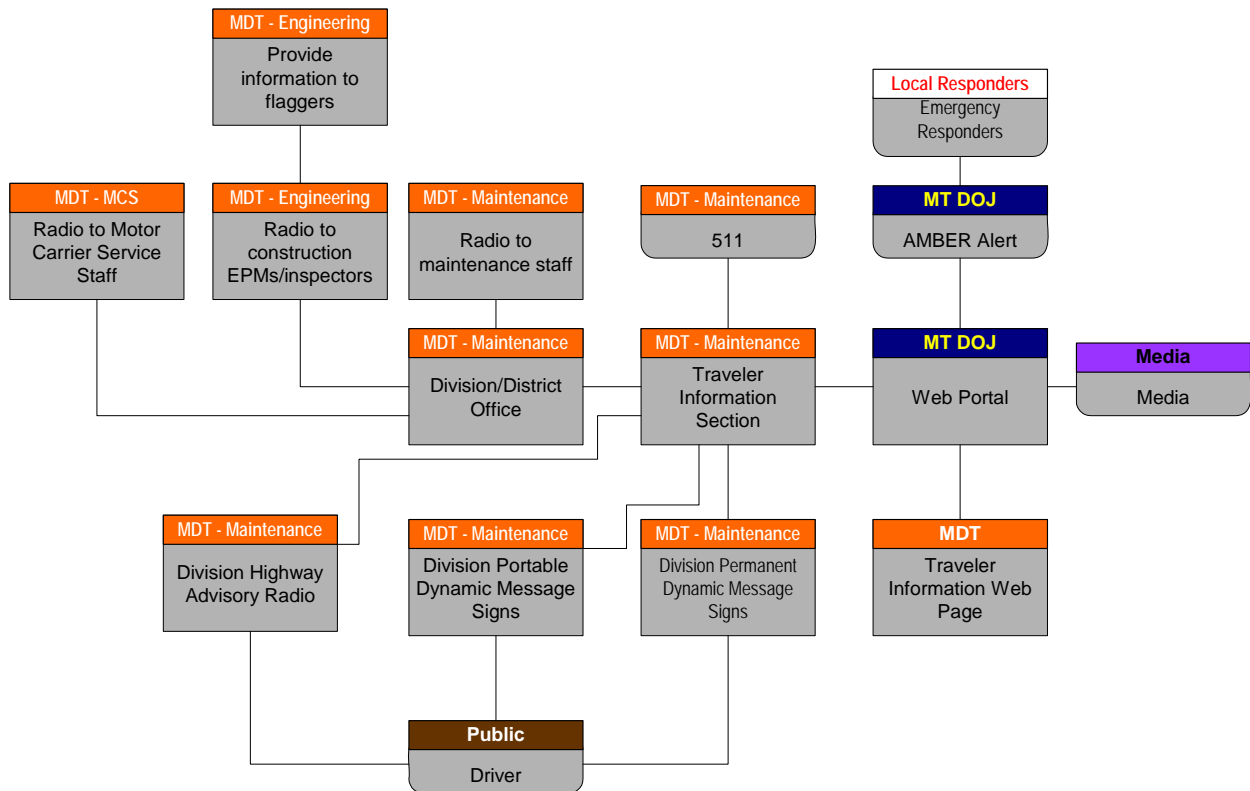


Figure 2: Headquarter Operation of ITS for Montana AMBER Alert.

Information to Consider

Per Federal Highway Administration policy (5), AMBER Alerts will take a lower priority than traffic and safety messages; this will be included in the software so locally posted messages of greater priority would not be overridden by an AMBER Alert. AMBER Alert messages may also be posted on portable DMS. Since these may not be in the field at the time an AMBER Alert is posted, only the portable signs already in the field will be used for AMBER Alerts. As part of the AMBER Alert II Grant, MDT will potentially purchase GPS for the portable DMS therefore allowing headquarters to know their locations at all times and whether or not they are available for an AMBER Alert.

Table 2: Headquarter AMBER Alert Operational Concept, Roles and Responsibilities.

Stakeholder	Responsibility
Department of Justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiates and terminates an AMBER Alert • Notifies MDT and other authorities • Sends an e-mail/fax/text message to list of media and local emergency responders
MDT Traveler Information Section	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Updates 511 system when AMBER Alert starts/stops • Calls divisions to post AMBER Alert messages on DMS, HAR, and over radio system
MDT Traveler Information Web Site	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indicates an AMBER Alert is in progress (high-visibility flashing logo)
MDT 511	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indicates an AMBER Alert is in progress (non-interruptible message at the beginning of a 511 call)
MDT Division Office	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post/remove AMBER messages on DMS, HAR, and over radio system • Locate portable DMS, if possible, to facilitate in AMBER Alert message
DMS and HAR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indicates an AMBER Alert is in progress (messages on sign/radio)
Maintenance crews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Receive start/stop information on an AMBER Alert and watch for possible suspects driving in area
Construction Project Managers/Inspectors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Receive start/stop information on an AMBER Alert and watch for possible suspects driving in area • Provide information to the flaggers in the construction area so they can watch as vehicles are stopped
Motor Carrier Service Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Receive start/stop information on an AMBER Alert and watch for possible suspects driving in area

CONCLUSIONS

To begin, the first operational concept, division operation, will be used at MDT for AMBER Alert notification and dissemination. This is currently the way that traveler information is disseminated in Montana and therefore makes sense. The other key factors are that currently the dynamic message signs and statewide radio system can not be operated from a central location. MDT is in the process of purchasing central DMS software. When this is complete, more of the AMBER Alert dissemination can be centralized at headquarters with exception of notification of construction and maintenance crews which will still need to be notified by the divisions due to technology constraints. The division operational concept will be used to produce the more detailed policies and procedures guide.

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