



**Office of Information  
Technology Services**

# Missing Persons Alert System



**Category: Improving State Operations**

Contact: Art Schloth

New York State Public Safety Cluster Chief Information Officer

518.457.6066

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## **Executive Summary**

State and federal laws require law enforcement agencies to immediately accept and investigate every missing child, missing college student, and missing vulnerable adult case, and to enter information into state and national missing person files. The New York State Missing Persons Clearinghouse, housed within the state Division of Criminal Justice Services, provides investigative support, assistance, and training to law enforcement agencies handling missing person cases, and operates pursuant to New York State Executive Law.

A key function of the Clearinghouse is the administration of three alert programs which are similar to national AMBER Alerts. The alerts are activated for three types of missing persons under specific circumstances: when police believe that a child under the age of 21, a college student of any age, or an adult who is 18 or older and has a cognitive impairment, has gone missing, and is at credible risk of harm or death.

Depending on the situation, alerts allow information about the missing person to be distributed to law enforcement, the public, and other entities, including hospitals and transportation hubs such as the New York State Thruway, airports, and bus stations, through a variety of channels: state and federal websites, social media, e-mail, television and radio stations, and NY-ALERT, a statewide system that delivers information to subscribers via text message, e-mail, telephone call, or fax.

Minutes matter when a person goes missing. However, the alert system relied on several manual processes that required law enforcement officers to enter information about a missing person several times across a variety of systems, resulting in 2½ to three hours of manual work prior to an alert being issued.

To address this critical issue, a project was implemented to streamline the way law enforcement agencies report missing person cases to the State and FBI. This streamlining reduced the time to issue alerts to approximately 10 minutes. Process efficiencies and the capture of additional information, including photographs and vehicle information, now assist law enforcement in New York State and across the country, allowing authorities and the public to have critical information that can result in enhanced investigation and speedier resolution of missing persons cases.

### **3. Business Problem and Solution Description**

When it was created in 1987, the Clearinghouse's sole responsibility was to focus on cases involving missing children under the age of 18. Its mandate was expanded in 1999 to assist law enforcement with missing college student cases, and to administer Missing Child and Missing College student alerts. In 2011, the Clearinghouse's role was enhanced again, requiring that staff assist law enforcement with cases involving missing vulnerable adults, and administer the Missing Vulnerable Adult Alert program.

The most recent expansion of the Clearinghouse's mandate prompted staff to evaluate the existing time-consuming and duplicative processes required to collect information about missing persons and to request an alert. The staff partnered with the state Office of Information Technology Services to develop and implement a systematic, streamlined process designed to disseminate information quickly to aid the safe recovery of an endangered missing person.

The solution that was developed combines several disparate processes and creates a single point of entry, allowing law enforcement to enter missing person cases and required information into State and Federal systems while simultaneously requesting an alert activation. In addition to streamlining the reporting process, the new system includes the ability to capture additional information about the individual, such as photos, vehicle information (if available), ethnicity, clothing descriptions, and persons of interest in connection with the disappearance.

Once law enforcement requests an alert, Clearinghouse staff review and approve the request, resulting in all available information about the individual being compiled and a poster including those details being created for distribution. The alert, with accompanying poster, is then sent to law enforcement, the media, individuals who have registered to receive alerts, hospitals, and any other entity that is appropriate for that case, including the state Department of Transportation and Thruway Authority, which can activate variable highway signs. As the missing person case is updated, changes are synchronized with the federal National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database and alerts can be modified to include additional information. When an alert is cancelled, notifications are issued and alert postings are removed.

It is important to note not all cases involving missing children, missing college students, or missing vulnerable adults result in the activation of an alert. Regardless, a single point of entry system facilitates the dissemination of information about those cases to the appropriate authorities. The following chart details how information about alert and non-alert cases is distributed.

Method of Distribution	AMBER Alert	Missing Child, College Student, Vulnerable Adult Alert	Missing Child, College Student, Vulnerable Adult No Alert
NYS AMBER Alert Website	X		
NYS Lottery Terminal Message Boards in stores (16,000)	X		
Variable Message Signs: Thruway (105), Other Highways (345)	X	X	
License Plate Readers	X	X	
NY-ALERT Public Subscriber List (61,000)	X	X	
NYS Thruway Toll Barrier Printers (59)	X	X	
NYS Thruway Service Area Televisions (27)	X	X	
Media Outlets - Radio/Television (659)	X	X	
NYC Taxis (18,000) and Limousines (12,000) ( <i>New York City Metropolitan Area activations only</i> )	X	X	
NYS AMBER Alert Partner Agencies	X	X	
NYS Division of Criminal Justice Services Website	X	X	X
National Center for Missing & Exploited Children Website ( <i>Children Only</i> )	X	X	X
Greyhound/Trailways/Other Bus Terminals (108)	X	X	X
AMTRAK Stations (13)	X	X	X
Airports/Transportation Safety Administration (40)	X	X	X
NYS/County Probation Agencies (59)	X	X	X
Hospitals/Clinics (827)	X	X	X
Police Agencies: Local, State, and Federal (1,328)	X	X	X
Canadian Law Enforcement Authorities	X	X	X
NYS/NYC Department of Health/School Records Flagged ( <i>Children Only</i> )	X	X	X

The solution was delivered during a 18-month period in three phases at a cost of \$1,020,130. An agile methodology was utilized in an effort to provide value to the Clearinghouse staff as quickly as possible. The first iteration of the project focused on the development of the foundational component, the Missing Persons Alert System in Java. The second iteration automated the alert activation components, leveraging service-oriented architecture and distributed messaging. The final iteration involved enhancing the integration with the Federal NCIC database so additional information captured could be shared.

#### **4. Significance of the Project**

As a result of this project, alerts are issued in minutes—typically fewer than 10—instead of the nearly three hours that were standard prior to implementation. This supports a faster response to a missing person case by providing critical information to law enforcement agencies, other entities and the public, which may contribute to a missing person being located more quickly and more importantly, unharmed.

#### **5. Benefit of the Project**

The Clearinghouse provides support and training to law enforcement agencies handling cases involving children, college students, and vulnerable adults who have gone missing. Key to that support is the administration of the alerts activated when those individuals go missing and are at credible risk of harm. Time is of the essence when an individual, particularly one that may be endangered due to autism, Down syndrome, Alzheimer's disease, or other cognitive impairment, goes missing.

During 2014, the Clearinghouse activated five Missing Children and 75 Missing Vulnerable Adult alerts at the request of law enforcement. There were no Missing College Student alerts activated. The following cases from 2014 illustrate the importance of sharing critical information across multiple channels and various constituencies:

- On June 18, the New York City Police Department requested an alert for a 9-year-old boy with ADHD who went missing while visiting his father. The alert was cancelled six hours later when the child was located safe at a local park.
- On November 13, the Westchester County Department of Public Safety requested an alert for a 17-year-old boy with autism, who had had run away from his caregiver in White Plains. The alert was cancelled 22 hours later when the child was safely located at this grandmother's residence in the Bronx.
- On March 2, the Suffolk County Police Department requested an alert for a 79-year-old man with dementia who was last seen driving his vehicle. The alert was cancelled 7½ hours later when the man was safely located 40 miles from his home. A fellow motorist saw the alert on highway signs, recognized the man's vehicle, and called police.
- On June 23, the New York City Police Department requested an alert for a 61-year-old woman with Alzheimer's disease who had left a hotel on foot. The alert was cancelled two hours later when the woman was safely located walking down the street by patrol officers who recognized her from the alert.