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The Nation

AOL to Start Issuing 'Amber Alerts' on Web

Safety: Officials worry notices of missing children may become too common. The online service would join a planned national system.

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WASHINGTON — Internet provider America Online and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children are launching an online version of "Amber alerts," the system that has been used in more than 15 states to try to locate missing children, officials said Monday.

The initiative, which AOL said is the first of its kind, allows its customers who register online for the service to receive e-mail alerts via computer, mobile phone or pager that a child is missing. Under the Amber alert system, when law enforcement concludes that a child is missing, officials immediately release the information to participating local media such as television and radio. In some states, such as California, the public is also notified through road signs.

"Now, law enforcement has just added AOL to that list," said Tatiana Gau, AOL senior vice president of integrity assurance. As soon as law enforcement officials notify AOL that an alert has been issued, AOL will forward the alert to those paying customers, over age 13, who request the notice.

"What this offers across the country is the ability to essentially use a secondary response system that reaches people online," said Ernie Allen, president of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

AOL will officially unveil the program today as President Bush, members of the National Center for Missing Children, law enforcement and parents of abducted children convene at the White House's first conference on missing, exploited and runaway children.

On Capitol Hill, Sens. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) and Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Texas) are sponsoring legislation that would set up a nationwide Amber alert system and provide federal funds to states and counties that do not have resources to make the program work.

The Amber system--which stands for America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response--was named after Amber Hagerman, a 9-year-old girl who was kidnapped and murdered in Texas in 1996.

The missing children's center estimates that 30 children have been rescued with help from Amber alerts in six years.

"There is no question that Amber alerts have been successful in capturing suspects and in returning children safely to their families," said Los Angeles Police Department spokesman Sgt. John Pasquariello.

"The only thing that we need to be concerned about is oversaturation or overuse of the system where we get into a 'cry wolf' situation where people may start ignoring the alerts."

"What is most important with this system is that it is reliable and that we use it [judiciously]."

While Gau acknowledged the potential for dulling the public's attention, she said AOL will issue alerts only to those of AOL's 26 million U.S. members who register to receive them. It will function like the company's existing alerts, which issue news and weather warnings to registered members.

According to AOL officials, members will also have the option of receiving alerts from nearby states, so that a user from California, for instance, could receive alerts from Nevada and Oregon.

The joint initiative comes after a summer of missing child cases that garnered national media attention--one of the most prominent of which involved 14-year-old Elizabeth A. Smart, who was abducted from her Salt Lake City bedroom while her parents slept.

Pasquariello said media coverage contributes to the notion that missing child cases are on the rise. "The reality is that children aren't abducted at epidemic rates," he said.

Of the 63 cities, states and counties that presently have Amber alerts, 58 have signed up for the AOL service, officials said.

"We know in these cases that time is the enemy and that if we can provide people with timely and reliable information through this online system, we can help solve these cases," Allen said.

The AOL service is a "step in moving toward national coordination efforts on Amber alerts," Gau said.