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Angry Dad Pushes For National Amber Alert

March 13

Just hours after Elizabeth Smart was found, her father's tears of joy were mixed with sharp words for Congress, which has failed to pass a national Amber Alert law.

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An emotional Ed Smart called upon Congress to pass a bill supporting a nationwide alert system today, marking the day his daughter was brought home. The alert would speed information on missing children across the country, right after the incidents occur.

"I am calling on House leadership ... to allow the Amber Alert to come to the floor today," Smart told Good Morning America. "Not tomorrow, not next year, not in months, but take some leadership and make today the day that not only Elizabeth was brought home, but the Amber Alert passed for the thousands of children who are out there that do not have this help."

Smart suggested lawmakers were responsible for the deaths of children who would have been found through a national Amber Alert network.

"The blood of those children is on someone's head," he said.

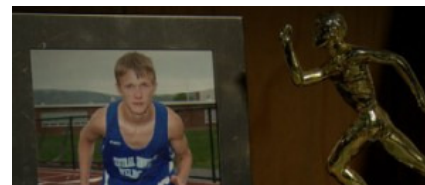
A bipartisan group of senators responded to Smart's call by voicing support for a national Amber Alert program, but House Judiciary Committee Chairman James Sensenbrenner said he continued to support such a network only as part of a broader package of child abuse and abduction prevention legislation.

There are 38 statewide Amber plans operating throughout the country. Back in October, in front of a group of parents with missing children, President Bush announced his plan to put federal money and muscle behind Amber Alert systems across the nation. Bush announced that \$10 million in federal money for training and equipment to be distributed to communities using the Emergency Alert System to inform residents of kidnappings within hours after they happen.

Congress has since been considering legislation that would create a nationwide Amber Alert program. It passed in the Senate, but has failed to pass in the House and has become bogged down as part of a bigger, more controversial crime bill championed by Sensenbrenner.

Sensenbrenner said today that all the important parts of the narrower

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measure were already in effect, thanks to an executive order signed by the president, and that only the broader measure will achieve what Ed Smart wants.

The Smart family — which received sporadic police tips about their daughter — has lobbied for the national Amber Alert law, even as they searched for their daughter.

Sporadic Tips, But No National System

Over the summer, the Smarts held twice-daily news briefings and thousands of volunteers combed the foothills of Salt Lake City, searching under brush for any sign of the blond girl.

The family often got calls from the police alerting them to grisly discoveries that might be linked to their missing daughter; they wanted the Smarts to know before the story hit the news.

Sometimes, the news beat the police. Hands and feet had been found in a canyon, or bones had been discovered in the desert. The Smarts would call police to ask if it was Elizabeth. Every time, the answer was no.

Because of the hit-or-miss nature of the information they received, Ed Smart and other family members renewed its call for a national Amber Alert system to swiftly notify the public of missing children through the media.

Immediate Notification

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Angry Dad Pushes For National Amber Alert

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March 13

The Amber Alert system, which works through a partnership between law enforcement and the media in many communities throughout the nation, has often been praised for its ability to immediately notify a large number of people about possible kidnappings in their area.

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The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, which has guided the Amber Alert system, credits it with the recovery of 31 children nationwide.

About 800,000 children are reported missing to police nationwide each year, according the Justice Department. Most, however, turn out to be runaways or children taken by a parent or other family member.

Amber Alert Criteria

When law enforcement officials are notified that a child has been abducted, it is their responsibility to determine if the case meets the criteria set by the NCMEC.

Before Amber Alerts are sent to primary radio stations, designated by the Emergency Alert System, and to local radio and television stations for immediate broadcast, the abduction must be confirmed. The child must also be in danger of serious harm or death, and there must be enough descriptive evidence available about the child and the abductor.

A White House fact sheet from the conference revealed there is support for a national standard for the rapid-response electronic notifications. The idea is to limit the alerts to "rare instances of serious child abductions" and ensure their effectiveness is not undermined. The NCMEC has established guidelines for issuing alerts that are based on the original Amber Plan developed in 1996.

Beginning in early November, the flashing alerts, which have shown up on televisions and freeway signs, will also be transmitted on the screens of computers, pagers and cell phones.

Subscribers to America Online can volunteer to receive the alerts about possible abductions in their community.

The NCMEC is also expected to contact other Internet companies, including Microsoft, TerraLycos and Yahoo, about taking part in the

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online Amber Alert system.

The Amber Alert system is named after Amber Hagerman, a little girl who was kidnapped while riding her bike around her Arlington, Texas, neighborhood in 1996. She was found dead four days later.

The NCMEC aims to recover children quickly. Statistic show that nearly 75 percent of all children who are kidnapped and murdered are killed within three hours of their abduction.

Children's advocates were elated by the good news about Elizabeth Smart, and hope it will lend hope to other parents awaiting word on missing children.

"We are very, very relieved," said Marilyn Ward, director of Child Search, a national missing children center based in Houston. "This should help the cause of missing children everywhere. We are thankful she's alive. It gives hope to people to never give up."

More information about Amber Alert systems can be found at www.missingkids.com.

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