

AMBER
ALERT
CALL 511



AMBER ALERT

Washington State AMBER Alert Protocol Review

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Introduction

This evaluation examines the actions and decision-making processes of the Washington State Patrol (WSP) Missing and Unidentified Persons Unit (MUPU) in the administration of the AMBER Alert system, with particular reference to the Travis Decker case. The purpose of this assessment is to review the facts surrounding the alert request and the subsequent activation or non-activation of an AMBER alert, including consideration of alternative alerts such as the Endangered Missing Person Alert (EMPA).

The evaluation is conducted under the auspices of the AMBER Alert Training and Technical Assistance Program (AATTAP), which is tasked with reviewing all relevant AMBER Alert plan documentation, protocols, and procedures. AATTAP's role is to ensure that the actions taken by the Washington State Patrol are in alignment with U.S. Department of Justice standards and recognized best practices.

Informed by structured interviews with MUPU program personnel and guided by the Washington State AMBER Alert Plan, the AATTAP AMBER Alert Protocol Evaluation Guide and other alerting source documentation provided by the Washington State Patrol, this analysis assesses the degree to which established procedures were observed and statutory obligations, where applicable, are fulfilled by the Washington State Patrol. It is noteworthy that Washington's AMBER Alert criteria are expressly aligned with national standards promulgated by the United States Department of Justice, thereby ensuring that each activation is consistent with recognized best practices and federal recommendations.

Factual Review of the AMBER Alert Request

On May 30, 2025, at approximately 11 p.m., the Wenatchee Police Department (WPD) contacted the Washington State Patrol (WSP) communications division to consult on whether the circumstances of the Travis Decker case, as understood and known to WPD at that time, met the criteria for an AMBER Alert activation. The initial inquiry did not include an explicit statement of concern to the dispatcher that Travis Decker had failed to return his children following a scheduled visitation.

The dispatcher reviewed the Washington AMBER Alert criteria with WPD, and WPD informed the dispatcher that the situation did not meet the threshold for danger of imminent death or serious bodily injury at that time. However, the dispatcher referred WPD to MUPU for further guidance. On May 30, 2025 at approximately 11:57 p.m., MUPU program staff received a call from WPD. During this communication, WPD advised MUPU



staff that, based on their initial investigation, while out of the ordinary for Decker to not return the children by the scheduled time, they did not have information to believe that Decker would harm the children or that the children were in imminent danger. When specifically asked by MUPU staff, WPD stated the children were not at risk of imminent death or serious bodily injury. MUPU staff offered to issue an EMPA; however, the EMPA was declined by WPD citing a local BOLO (“be on the lookout”) that WPD had already issued.

On May 31, 2025, at approximately 1 p.m., WPD recontacted MUPU staff and provided additional information obtained from a follow-up interview of an individual close to Decker who reported that they did not believe Decker posed a threat to the children. After considering the supplemental interview — which reiterated that there was no belief that Decker posed an immediate threat to the children — MUPU staff again determined that the imminent death or serious bodily injury AMBER Alert criteria were not met, in accordance with the Washington State AMBER Alert Plan dated July 2022 (the plan in place on May 30, 2025). MUPU staff again offered the EMPA, which WPD accepted. The EMPA was subsequently activated by MUPU staff on May 31, 2025 at approximately 3:19 p.m., after receipt of the necessary information from WPD via the MUPU shared email inbox.

On June 2, 2025, WPD notified MUPU that the children had been located deceased. Following this notification, MUPU staff managed the cancellation of the EMPA and issued a public update to confirm the conclusion of the active alert.

Evaluation Criteria

The request for an AMBER Alert in the Travis Decker case was acknowledged promptly by WSP and processed in accordance with the recommended best practice of handling such requests as timely as possible. Interviews with MUPU staff confirm that initial contact from Wenatchee Police Department on May 30, 2025 was addressed immediately, and subsequent communications by MUPU were handled without delay. Once all necessary information was received from WPD, the alternative alert was issued within approximately 30 to 45 minutes. While documentation practices were applied, they were not fully standardized; the case was logged in an internal spreadsheet and supported by a process checklist, but no formal denial record was created. Staff maintained written notes and utilized shared resources to capture decision points, though the absence of a formal decision-making activation matrix or checklist for AMBER Alert criteria was noted as a procedural gap. There is no evidence of delays from MUPU staff or WSP requiring justification, and the information from WPD available at the time to assess the AMBER Alert



criteria — specifically age, abduction status and imminent danger — was relied upon by MUPU staff during the initial and follow up decision-making processes. Additional details — including photographs of the children and NCIC verification — were obtained from WPD prior to EMPA alert issuance. These actions reflect adherence to best practices, albeit with opportunities for improvement in documentation consistency and decision-making tools, including a checklist to guide a more comprehensive assessment.

Eligibility Assessment: Abduction Confirmation

According to AATTAP interviews with MUPU staff, the abduction assessment appeared to rely heavily on statements obtained during WPD’s investigation, which indicated that Travis Decker picked the children up for a planned evening court approved visitation but failed to return the children as scheduled. During their discussions with WPD, the MUPU program specialist assessed whether the incident qualified as a family abduction with demonstrated risk. Both the MUPU program specialist and program manager confirmed that with respect to the abduction confirmation criteria for an AMBER Alert, the case involved a parental custody situation rather than an immediate presumption that an abduction had occurred. Although the circumstances presented some ambiguity — given that the children were not returned as scheduled — MUPU staff applied a “best judgment” approach in consultation with WPD as the investigating law enforcement agency. The evaluating MUPU program specialist documented their decision-making process through internal notes and a procedural checklist, and the MUPU program manager emphasized the importance of peer review and clarifying questions during such evaluations. However, the interviews of MUPU staff revealed that while these judgments were discussed and recorded informally, there is no formalized decision-making matrix or checklist specifically designed to capture these nuanced determinations. This gap underscores the need for more structured documentation tools to support consistent application of criteria in ambiguous cases.

Eligibility Assessment: Imminent Danger Assessment

The available information at the time of WPD’s contact with MUPU on both May 30, 2025, and May 31, 2025 did not support a finding that the children were in imminent danger of death or serious bodily injury. WPD advised MUPU staff that family members interviewed expressed no concern that Decker would harm the children. During the follow up discussion with WPD on 05/31/2025, MUPU staff provided WPD examples of imminent danger and WPD reaffirmed that WPD did not have any information to suggest the children



were in danger of imminent death or serious bodily injury. Additionally, WPD informed MUPU staff that WPD had no information indicating a history of domestic violence within the family and did not report any mental health concerns Decker may have been experiencing at the time he picked the children up for the scheduled visitation — factors that would have predicated an assessment of imminent danger. This assessment was a decisive factor in denying the AMBER Alert request. The evaluating MUPU program specialist emphasized that the absence of any indication of danger of imminent death or serious bodily injury was central to their determination, and this conclusion was reinforced during subsequent communications with WPD. While staff considered risk factors such as the children’s age and the nature of the incident, these did not rise to the level required under the AMBER Alert criteria.

Eligibility Assessment: Sufficient Descriptive Information

The Wenatchee Police Department provided adequate descriptive information, including photographs and vehicle details, which were verified prior to issuing the alternative EMPA. NCIC entry was confirmed by MUPU staff, and templates were used to ensure completeness of information. No deficiencies were reported in this area.

Eligibility Assessment: Age Criteria

The three children involved were under the age of 18, meeting the age requirement in the Washington Statewide AMBER Alert Plan for AMBER Alert eligibility. This factor was satisfied but insufficient to override the absence of other required criteria including abduction confirmation and imminent danger to issue an AMBER Alert. Age was not a limiting factor in the determination to issue an EMPA.

Eligibility Assessment: Entry into National Systems

As the alternative EMPA was issued, MUPU staff verified that the case details had been entered into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) with the appropriate “missing/endangered” flag. This step was documented and aligns with national standards.

In addition to entry into national systems as an eligibility assessment, the Washington State AMBER Alert Plan criteria also includes an element requiring that the incident must be reported to and investigated by a law enforcement agency. This factor and the NCIC entry factor were satisfied but insufficient to override the absence of the abduction confirmation and imminent danger required criteria to issue an AMBER Alert.



Documentation and Recordkeeping

Documentation on final determinations of alerting assessments and communications with WPD occurred through internal spreadsheets, shared process checklists, and personal notes, but lacked full standardization; however, MUPU staff identified gaps in the formalization and consistency of these practices. The need for improved documentation protocols is recognized as an area for ongoing enhancement.

Communication & Coordination, After-Action Review

Communication by MUPU staff with law enforcement and partner agencies was timely and effective. The decision to deny the AMBER Alert request was clearly communicated to WPD during phone communications with WPD sworn staff, and MUPU staff communicated the option for the alternative alert with WPD during the initial and follow up phone conversations. Once the EMPA was approved, MUPU staff promptly notified the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) for activation of the variable message signs (VMS). Following a request from WPD to expand the EMPA alerting region, MUPU staff promptly notified WSDOT of the expanded regions for the VMS.

The cancellation update was issued promptly upon receipt of information from WPD, though MUPU staff noted that the cancellation limited public understanding of the outcome in the absence of additional information.

After-action review forms were distributed but yielded limited feedback as of the date of the MUPU staff interviews. Some MUPU staff send the after-action review forms to the law enforcement agency at the time of the alert activation; however, there appears to be a lack of consistency in the process for sending after-action review forms at the time of alert cancellation. The Washington State AMBER Alert Plan requires that, at the completion of an active alert, the initiating law enforcement agency submit a narrative summary of the incident to the AMBER Alert Coordinator, which includes details of the role the alert played in the recovery, if applicable. Although the Decker case did not meet the criteria for an AMBER Alert activation, an after-action form including a narrative summary of the incident will assist with best practices and process improvements.

While there are currently no formal in person after-action debriefs conducted by WSP on any activations, plans to implement structured debriefs were noted.



Policy and Legal Compliance

The decision to deny the AMBER Alert and issue an alternative alert was consistent with Washington State's AMBER Alert Plan and aligned with federal standards. Interviews of MUPU staff consistently indicate that evaluations are conducted based solely on the facts and criteria set forth in the Washington State AMBER Alert Plan, and there is no evidence that bias or external pressure influenced the decision-making process.

The Washington State AMBER Alert Plan establishes that the Chief of the Washington State Patrol is the state AMBER Alert Manager and holds final decision-making authority supported by an advisory committee that includes representatives from law enforcement, broadcasters, a victim advocate, the WSDOT, the Washington State Emergency Management Division, and the AMBER Alert Coordinator. This governance structure is designed to ensure that all aspects of the statewide AMBER Alert Plan have collaborative administrative oversight with respect to the development, implementation, review and recommendation for revisions to the plan.

Overall Assessment

The evaluation demonstrates adherence to AMBER Alert principles and national standards, with timely decision-making and effective communication. However, procedural gaps in documentation, training, and structured evaluation tools present opportunities for improvement.

Throughout the Decker case, MUPU staff adhered to established protocols in both the Washington State AMBER Alert Plan and the [Washington State Endangered Missing Person Advisory Plan](#) for evaluating alert requests. The alerting decision-making process involves consultation among program specialists and, when necessary, supervisory review. Documentation of the Decker case was maintained in accordance with internal procedures, including the use of a procedural checklist and shared records. The chain of command was observed, with program specialists exercising authority to activate alerts, and the MUPU program manager/AMBER Alert Coordinator providing guidance and oversight as appropriate.

In summary, the Travis Decker case was evaluated in accordance with Washington State's AMBER Alert criteria, which are aligned with national standards. The facts indicate that, based on available evidence and interviews, the criteria for abduction and imminent



danger were not met, and the alert request was processed in accordance with established protocols.

The EMPA cancellation in the Decker case, in the absence of additional information on the welfare of the children, resulted in limited public information regarding the outcome. In missing children cases — particularly high-profile incidents such as the Decker case - timing of the alert cancellation combined with updated information from the investigating law enforcement agency is crucial for ensuring transparency and public understanding.

After-action review forms were distributed to the requesting agency, consistent with evolving MUPU practices aimed at improving feedback and documentation.

Recommendations and Follow-Up

Training Needs

Interpreting imminent danger remains a training gap, and MUPU has identified the need for clearer guidance and structured tools to support these evaluations. Expanded training for all MUPU staff on imminent danger interpretation using scenario-based exercises will enhance the unit's ability to consistently apply AMBER Alert criteria and continue to make informed, timely decisions in complex cases.

While there was no formal, standardized onboarding training for new MUPU staff at the time the current MUPU program manager started in early 2025, the development of a comprehensive training process is underway. It is recommended that this formal onboarding program be completed and fully implemented prior to the appointment of any additional MUPU staff, to ensure consistency and preparedness across the unit.

It is recommended that training materials be developed for use by WSP in training local law enforcement agencies on the alerting process, including the state AMBER Alert criteria as outlined in the Washington State AMBER Alert Plan. In addition, supplemental resources should be developed to support law enforcement in achieving a clear understanding of alert processes and eligibility criteria, thereby promoting consistency and adherence to best practices across all agencies involved in activations.

Policy & Procedures

To strengthen the effectiveness and consistency of the AMBER Alert process, it is recommended that a formal decision-making checklist for AMBER Alert eligibility criteria



be developed and adopted by MUPU staff. In addition, enhancing documentation protocols through the implementation of centralized, standardized records management systems will improve record-keeping and support compliance with best practices.

The after-action review process can be reinforced by conducting structured debriefs following each activation — both AMBER Alert and EMPA — enabling continuous learning and process improvement.

Finally, public communication at the time of cancellations can be improved with clear and timely updates in collaboration with the investigating law enforcement agency, ensuring transparency and maintaining public trust in the alerting system.

Conclusion

This comprehensive evaluation of the AMBER Alert request in the Travis Decker case demonstrates that the Washington State Patrol Missing and Unidentified Persons Unit (MUPU) responded promptly and appropriately to the alert request based on information provided by the requesting agency, Wenatchee Police Department, adhering to the established protocols and criteria outlined in the Washington State AMBER Alert Plan. The evaluation found that, while MUPU's actions were generally consistent with national standards and best practices, opportunities remain for strengthening the process — particularly in the areas of documentation, structured decision-making tools, and training on imminent danger assessment. The case underscores the critical importance of having clear, comprehensive criteria and robust procedures in place; such standards not only guide objective and timely decision-making, but also ensure transparency, accountability, and public trust in the AMBER Alert system. Continued commitment to these principles, along with ongoing improvements in training and documentation will enhance the effectiveness and integrity of Washington's AMBER Alert Plan.