

Washington State Patrol

Chief John R. Batiste



2007 Herman Goldstein Award for Excellence in Problem Oriented Policing



Homeward Bound Project

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Summary

★ Project Title ★

Homeward Bound Project

Scanning

Every year in Washington State, numerous children are abducted, kidnapped, or unlawfully taken. Unfortunately, this issue has fallen from public view and little effort seems to be invested to recover missing children. The news media focuses on current events and not cold missing children cases. After taking the initial report, law enforcement generally has few leads to follow up on and cases became inactive. It was clear that missing children cases fall from public attention and this lack of attention is contributing to the low recovery rate.

Analysis

Several measures have been used in the past to increase public exposure to specific, high-profile cases. These include short-term attention through emergency broadcasts such as the Amber Alert program, and longer term media campaigns, product advertising, and postal mailers. The challenge was coming up with new and innovative ways of long-term direct notification to the public in order to greatly increase the exposure of specific cases. This exposure would, in turn, increase the chances of specific missing children being recovered and returned to their parents or guardians. It would also increase the potential of solving non-related cases through public understanding of the overall issue.

Response

It was decided to apply large missing children posters to the sides of commercial trailers, creating a rolling billboard to travel across the state and region to be seen by thousands of motorists.

Local businesses contributed funds, and a graphics art company agreed to produce four weather-resistant posters at a reduced cost. As a pilot project, these posters were attached to four trailers belonging to Gordon Trucking, a reputable trucking corporation in the Seattle area and a long-time partner with the Washington State Patrol in public safety.

Assessment

In just a few short months after the trucks were outfitted, one of the four children was recovered by the U.S. Marshal's Service in Montana. Although the method by which the

Summary (continued)

information came to law enforcement wasn't clear, the child recovered said she had seen the media coverage of the project and was aware that her mother was looking for her.



Then-Commercial Vehicle Division Commander Captain Coral Estes and Trooper Renee Padgett at the inauguration of the Homeward Bound Project.

Scanning

Trooper Renee Padgett is a sixteen-year veteran of the Washington State Patrol (WSP) assigned to the Commercial Vehicle Division in King County. As the mother of two, Padgett realized that her own children could potentially end up missing. While she was on maternity leave and on the way to a doctor appointment, she found herself stuck in traffic in Seattle. She realized that she was surrounded by semi tractors and trailers. Having nothing to look at other than the sky or the back-ends and sides of trucks, she could not help but think what a waste of space the trailers had on them.

This led to thinking, what about putting posters of missing children on the sides? Padgett remembered when it was common to see photos on milk cartons or at the post office. Padgett felt more could be done to locate and recover missing children and she began to consider what additional measures could be implemented to help return missing children to their homes. She felt the WSP Problem Oriented Public Safety (POPS) philosophy could be applied to develop an effective response.



Chief John Batiste of the WSP speaks at the press conference announcing the Homeward Bound project. Captain Estes and Trooper Padgett are at right, Ms. Sue Miller is near the center (in black pant suit).

Analysis

The WSP's Missing Children Clearinghouse (MCC) was created in 1985 to assist law enforcement agencies and parents in locating missing and exploited children. The MCC maintains a toll-free, twenty-four-hour telephone hotline and creates and electronically distributes posters of missing juveniles via the LOCATER System. The Clearinghouse provides training on issues surrounding missing and exploited children, maintains a database on all Washington State missing juvenile reports entered into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC), and tracks the statistics for trend analysis and Legislative resource allocation.

According to the MCC, there are approximately 20,000 children reported missing each year in the state of Washington. Approximately 90% of these are runaways. The remaining 10% are custodial interference and non-family abductions. Approximately 1,800 children are missing at any given time. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) reports that 1 in 6 children are recovered due to the public viewing a picture.

Since 1985 the NCMEC, in partnership with the United States Postal Service, direct-mails ADVO cards with photographs of missing children to 75 million households. (*ADVO is a direct mail media company.*) ADVO cards have led to the recovery of at least 144 missing children.

It was common to see news reports of kidnappings, custodial interference, and runaways, not only in Washington State but around the country. These incidents seemed to attract a lot of initial attention; however, there is very little ongoing follow-up. In addition, media coverage was usually limited to the local area of occurrence, and children taken by non-custodial parents often were taken hundreds of miles away from home. It was rare to see flyers or posters. Milk carton photographs were discontinued in the 1970's.

The Amber Alert system is effective for immediate notification to the public within those first critical hours after occurrence. Amber Alerts are very short in duration, and some method of providing ongoing notification to the public was needed.

Response

This project was guided by two premises: First, that increased exposure of missing children cases increases the chances of recovery. And second, because people spend so much of their lives in their vehicles, this was naturally a great way to reach them. The goal was to increase public awareness of specific missing child cases.

Options

Traditional media was considered but discounted. Radio advertising reaches a large market, but is expensive, short in duration, and can be ignored. Highway billboards are potentially seen by every motorist who passes by and have the advantage of being able to include a photograph of the missing child. However, like radio, billboards also are expensive. Another disadvantage is that billboards are stationary. The same motorists see the same billboards every day while commuting to work. Some sort of low-cost rolling advertising containing the missing child's photograph seemed to be the right approach. Advertising on transit busses was also discounted due to cost, and because the busses would travel within a limited geographic area. In Seattle, Washington, an iPod advertising wrap-around on a Metro bus cost one million dollars each month.

Trooper Padgett recognized that commercial trucks/trailers would be the ideal medium for disseminating missing child information. A commercial trailer can display a large poster with the child's information and picture and could potentially travel all over the United States or to selected regions.

Obstacles

Even though commercial trailer advertising was the least expensive option, it still was not free, and Trooper Padgett had no budget of any kind. There were no graphic design resources either. Partnerships would be essential for this project to be successful.

Padgett contacted Lieutenant Julie Myer of the Commercial Vehicle Division and explained the need for truck trailers. Myer contacted President Mike Southards of the Washington Trucking Association, explained the concept of placing posters of missing children on trucks, and asked if there were any companies that might donate the use of a trailer. Two local companies stepped up and agreed to each provide two trailers. The companies were Gordon Trucking and Peninsula Trucking.

The next hurdle was obtaining the graphics of the children to go on the trailers. Padgett contacted graphic companies all over the United States and Canada. She described the project to each company and asked for an example of a poster and what it would look like on a semi trailer. All the companies thought it was a great idea and would reduce the cost of the posters, but it was still too much (one local company wanted \$1,000 per poster, without installation).

Response (Continued)

Padgett spoke with the CEO of Imagic in California. The owner, Davis Allman, said he loved the idea and would produce the graphics for the poster and then send a sample of both the poster and what it would look like on the semi trailer. It was his idea to make the poster size 7ft by 7ft. (Imagic is a large, multi-million dollar company that does wrap-around advertising on busses, movie posters, airport graphics, and stadium art.) Imagic submitted a bid for 100 posters at \$239.00 per poster with installation. There were hours of dialogue between Padgett and the graphic designer to get the poster just right. Imagic agreed to produce the four initial posters for \$2,500.

The next challenge was securing funding in order to purchase the posters. Padgett contacted several different agencies looking for support and funding – Oprah’s Angel Network, The Gates Foundation, Starbucks, and others were contacted with no results. Padgett spoke in passing to the owners of Budget Auto Wrecking about the program. Both Vic Payment and his wife, Mary, immediately volunteered to sponsor the first four posters to go on the trailers. Vic and Mary had known a family that had a child go missing and felt a connection to the cause. They donated \$2,500.

Gordon Trucking is a family-owned business headquartered in Pacific, Washington. Their trucks travel throughout the United States and Canada. They have terminals in Oregon, Utah, California, Wisconsin, and Arizona. Gordon Trucking has over 1,300 trucks and trailers in their fleet. Trailers remain active for approximately five years. Posters were placed on the newest trailers to maximize the exposure time. The trucks with posters were sent to areas where authorities believed the missing child might be.

Trooper Padgett contacted Ms. Sue Miller of the WSP Missing Children Clearinghouse/Missing and Unidentified Person Unit for assistance in identifying four missing child cases to use in the pilot project. Miller selected four suitable cases in consultation with the NCMEC, local law enforcement, and the families of the missing children. Miller reviewed the NCMEC website and determined which cases were cold cases (meaning there were no current leads for the law enforcement agencies to work). How long the child had been missing was considered. Recent cases increased the chances for recovery; however, costs to produce the posters would be lost if the child was recovered during the production phase.

Children’s appearances change rapidly as they get older, making identification even more difficult the longer a child is missing. The NCMEC produces age-progressed photographs to help see how the child would look today.

Instead of removing the posters of children once they were located, it was decided that the word “RECOVERED” would be pasted across the bottom. The poster would continue to bring attention to Homeward Bound and its successes.

Response (Continued)

On the day the posters were to be installed, Peninsula Trucking notified the WSP they would not participate because the posters covered part of their logo. Gordon Trucking had to scramble to get two additional trailers ready prior to the media event.

On April 21, 2006, the first four trailers hit the highways in 11 western states, displaying the photographs and information on the four missing children. The four children were:

- Shania Supanich, 9 years old
- Aqueda Arias, 7 years old
- Sofia Hernandez, 11 years old,
- Adre'anna Jackson, 9 years old

While the posters were in production, information was received that Adre'anna Jackson had been found deceased. Her poster was pulled from production and Francisco Rios-Carriere, age 3, was selected to replace her. The news of Jackson's death had a huge impact on the program. Her death brought reality to the fact that missing children are often killed by their abductors. It brought urgency and validation to the program and a desire to get the posters out and on as many trucks and with as many children as possible.

The following is a breakdown of the miles and locations the posters have covered to date:

Supanich: Montana, Idaho, California, Western U.S. (over 94,000 miles before her recovery in September)

Arias: Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Western U.S. (45,857 miles)

Hernandez: Western U.S. (87,340 miles)

Rios: Western U.S. (103,637 miles)

Assessment

On October 17, 2006, Shania Supanich was found and returned home to her mother after two and one-half years. Shania told the U.S. Marshals she had seen news coverage on the Homeward Bound project. She knew her mother was looking for her and this gave her hope.

One of four children recovered represents a recovery rate of only 25%, which is hard to categorize as a success under traditional thinking. However, to Shania's family, the results are huge. The recovery of Shania also gives hope to other families and inspires the stakeholders to expand the project. Gordon Trucking has agreed to provide 100 additional trailers as well as donating \$10,000 for graphics and installation.

The project's results can also be measured quantifiably. In 2006, the Missing Children Clearinghouse received 475 missing children tips. This is an increase of 37% over 2005.

Agency and Officer Information

This project involved agency personnel from all levels and several bureaus. The concept was the creation of Trooper Padgett. She received support from her chain of command within the Commercial Vehicle Division (CVD), Sergeant Luke Zebley, Lieutenant Julie Myer, and Captain Coral Estes. Zebley, Padgett's direct supervisor, was supportive, acted as a sounding board for her ideas, and provided moral support when the program had hurdles to overcome. He assisted in the media kick-off for the first wave of posters and attended the functions associated with the Homeward Bound program, including attending the MCC open house to get ideas for the WSP POPS Forum presentation. Zebley helped provide a framework for the PowerPoint presentation for the forum. Myer was first approached by Padgett, seeking support for her project and direction for resources. Myer connected the Washington Trucking Association (WTA) to Padgett to begin identifying companies who would be interested in having posters of the children on their trailers. Estes was the CVD commander and was a huge supporter every step of the way. She assisted in reviewing the presentation for the forum and participated in the unveiling and recovery media events.

The CVD has had a long-standing, cooperative partnership with WTA and Gordon Trucking. Homeward Bound has further strengthened those relationships.

Ms. Sue Miller, with the WSP Missing Children Clearinghouse, acted as the liaison between the WSP, the NCMEC, and the missing victims' families. The Office of Government and Media Relations coordinated news releases as well as the press conferences for the project kick-off and recovery of the first missing child.

Trooper Padgett's Homeward Bound project is one of approximately 50 POPS projects that are active at any given time within the agency. In the late 1990's, the WSP carefully selected and trained 72 "POPS Troopers." These officers became the agents of change and for many years represented the face of POP in the WSP.

The concepts of problem-solving and partnerships have been integrated into virtually every system internal to the WSP, including cadet basic training, supervisor and mid-level manager training, the promotional process, and the job performance appraisal process. All WSP personnel receive training in POPS, and Trooper Padgett's Homeward Bound, like the majority of POPS projects, is not coordinated by a "POPS Trooper." Project coordinators receive no monetary or promotional incentive to initiate a POPS project. Officers are invited to attend the annual WSP POPS Forum to observe presentations on past years' exemplary projects. In addition, the WSP POPS Training Guide is available online as a problem-solving resource to every WSP employee.

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