

## Could alert have saved baby Isaiah? - Police not aware of new system while searching for Isaiah

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DETROIT -- Police lost critical time when they waited 36 hours to activate a new missing children's alert system in the case of Isaiah Lewis, the infant whose mother gave him to a stranger at a bus stop in Detroit.

Even those involved concede that the abduction of Isaiah, who was murdered by the stranger, might have turned out differently if police had quickly activated the 2-month-old program, known as Amber Alert of Michigan.

Launched in June, the program connects law enforcement to television and radio stations so they can broadcast frequent bulletins about abducted children, in hopes the public can help locate the child before he or she is harmed. The second such program in the country, Amber Alert already is credited with bringing one Michigan child safely home.

"Who knows? It may have turned out differently," said Detroit Police Lt. James Elliot, who notified Michigan State Police of Isaiah's disappearance the day after it happened. State police, in turn, sent out faxes to radio and television stations in southeastern Michigan.

There were several reasons why the Amber Alert wasn't immediately activated, Elliot said.

Not only was Elliot unaware of the new program, but police also were immediately immersed in the investigation after Isaiah's abduction was reported about 1:30 a.m. Aug. 3. Investigators were busy ruling out the parents as suspects, searching through dark alleys and abandoned buildings looking for the baby, and following up on a tip that a couple with a baby had gotten off a bus in downtown Detroit. Elliot later learned about the Amber Alert program from a state trooper.

Shaniqua Betty, 20, told police she gave 3-month-old Isaiah to a man at a bus stop, so he could watch the baby while she returned to her boyfriend's home to get her purse and shoes. She had left the house in the middle of the night after a fight with the boyfriend. When she returned to the bus stop, the man and Isaiah were gone.

She notified police immediately, but they didn't find Isaiah's body until a week later when **Harold Reed**, a homeless man, led them to the body in an abandoned Detroit house. Police say **Reed** admitted to killing Isaiah within the first few hours he had the child.

**Reed** has been charged with murder, and Betty will be charged this week with second-degree child abuse.

Experts say the most urgent time to find abducted children is within hours after they are gone. In 1997, the first national study of children who were abducted then later murdered showed that 44 percent were dead within the first hour, 74 percent by the third hour and 91 percent were dead after 24 hours.

"It's those first eight hours that are the most important," said Robin Trumbull, founder and president of Amber Alert. "If something is going to happen to a child, that's when it's going to occur."

Thousands of children are reported missing each year in the United States. The National Association for Missing and Exploited Children says 876,213 people were reported missing last year, with nearly 90 percent of them juveniles. In Michigan, more than 2,000 children are now listed as missing. However, it is rare for a child who is abducted to be murdered. Approximately one child is abducted and murdered for every 10,000 reports of a missing child.

Still, cities and states across the country are trying new strategies to help save these children.

Michigan's Amber Alert is still new, Trumbull said, so the system isn't perfect yet. But she said it is essential that police quickly activate the alert because the chances of finding a child increase when the public gets involved.

"Instead of having three or four dozen eyes looking for this child, you could have hundreds of thousand of eyes aiding you," she said.

Amber Alert, started in the Dallas, Texas, area, is named after Amber Hagerman of Texas, who was 12 years old when she was abducted and murdered. Michigan modeled its program after the one in Texas. While many cities have adopted similar program, Michigan is in the forefront in launching a statewide effort.

The program is not for every child that turns up missing, but for those who are in danger of serious bodily harm or death.

Since it became available to Michigan police in June, Amber Alert has been activated four times.

The first case, in Hillsdale, Mich., was canceled because the child was deemed a runaway, and runaway cases do not meet the criteria for Amber Alert, except in certain situations.

The second, a runaway case in Boyne City, Mich., was deemed appropriate for Amber Alert because the 12-year-old girl with severe epilepsy ran away from her foster home without her medication. Amber Alert was activated within an hour of her disappearance. A few hours later, the girl called her parents because she had heard her name on the radio, and was scared that police were looking for her.

In the third case, a woman in Jackson, Mich., was beat up by her boyfriend, who took her 7-year-old son and was believed to be heading toward Canada. She notified police shortly after 6 p.m. By 7 p.m., police activated the Amber Alert, and within an hour radio and television stations in nearby regions were broadcasting the boy's disappearance.

Police found the boy by 4 a.m. that day, but they say the child was returned safely following negotiations with the boyfriend's lawyers, and Amber Alert was used as a backup.

"It's a great program, but I can't say it was actually the reason we got the child back," said Sgt. Terri Crawford, who worked on the case.

Isaiah's case was the most recent to have been put on the Amber Alert.

Whether it would have helped had police activated the alert earlier will never be known.

**Reed** told police he had killed Isaiah soon after Betty gave him the child.

#### About Amber Alert

Amber Alert of Michigan aims to link law enforcement officials with television and radio stations and other media outlets to help them find missing children during the critical hours when they are gone.

Launched in June, criteria for activation of the program includes:

- \* The missing person must be under 18.
- \* Police must be notified the child either has been abducted, missing involuntarily, missing and disabled or an "endangered" missing, such as they urgently need medication.
- \* Critical information must be provided about the victim's clothing, physical description and where last seen.

#### Mom faces abuse charges

DETROIT -- Shaniqua Betty, the woman who left her infant with a stranger now accused of killing the boy, was charged Tuesday with second-degree child abuse.

Betty, 20, is expected to surrender this week for arraignment on the felony charge in the death early this month.

Some detectives didn't want Betty charged in sympathy to a tragic lapse in judgment, Wayne County Prosecutor Michael Duggan said Tuesday.

"I did not want her to go to her baby's funeral as a charged criminal, so we held off," Duggan said. But "Ms. Betty committed a crime and we have to protect kids."

**Harold Reed** , 48, has admitted killing 3-month-old Isaiah Lewis.

Ronald J. Hansen

Caption: Isaiah Betty

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