

CASE BACKGROUND:

On Monday, December 6, 2010, at 9:24 a.m., officers of the Roanoke County, Virginia Police Department were called to a home where Tina Smith, age 41, had just been found murdered. Two co-workers, concerned because Ms. Smith was absent from work for the second day in a row, had gone by the home to check on their friend. One of them had a key to the house and found Ms. Smith's body inside the home.

On their arrival, officers learned that Ms. Smith's daughter, Brittany Mae Smith, age 12, was not at the house and had not arrived at school. Detectives were called to the scene and a detective was assigned the investigation. The investigation quickly revealed that Ms. Smith's car, a silver colored 2005 Dodge Neon, was missing, as well as a Chevrolet Blazer belonging to Ms. Smith's boyfriend, Jeffrey Easley. Detectives learned that family members had been expressing growing concern over the nature of Easley's relationship with Brittany and that Tina Smith had told Easley to move out by the previous Friday, December 3. Significantly, no one had seen or talked to Tina Smith since that same Friday.

Based on this information, detectives believed that Easley was a suspect in Tina Smith's murder, that he had likely abducted 12-year-old Brittany, and that he probably had a three day head start and, thus, could be anywhere. Detectives sent lookouts to police agencies in the region and entered Brittany, Easley, and the two vehicles into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC). They also requested the Virginia State Police to broadcast an AMBER ALERT for the child.

Roanoke County Police were dealing with a full-blown crisis; a woman was murdered and her 12-year-old daughter was likely abducted by the killer. It was imperative that staff develop a strategy that would result in Brittany's safe return and see suspect Jeffrey Easley captured. To achieve these goals, the County's Public Information Office staff relied on experience and training to prepare and manage communication throughout the search, which concluded five days later when a woman who saw the story on CNN spotted Brittany and Easley panhandling outside a supermarket thousands of miles from Virginia.

SO HOW DID ROANOKE COUNTY'S COMMUNICATIONS OFFICE, STAFFED WITH JUST THREE PEOPLE, REACH THE NATIONAL MEDIA IN LESS THAN A DAY? BELOW ARE THE KEY POINTS THAT STAFF TOOK INTO CONSIDERATION IN DEVELOPING A SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATIONS PLAN THAT WAS INNOVATIVE, EFFECTIVE, AND UTILIZED PARTNERSHIPS.

Message Management: If faced with a critical incident take the time to evaluate your objective.

Create a concise and primary message about the situation and maintain this message throughout. Also, communicate with media outlets immediately to establish your office and staff as the primary contact for information during the emergency. This is crucial in order to manage your message and eliminate one media receiving information over another. Tip: Keep a running fact sheet of known information by the telephone to ensure you, your staff, and any volunteers remain on message when media inquiries begin. Examples of key information for a "Frequently Asked Question" list may include a summary of the situation, correct spellings for any key people involved in the situation, the web address for reporters or the public to find information, phone numbers for the public, dates, times, and locations for upcoming press conferences.

Utilize All Available Resources: It is essential that you know in advance how you will communicate your message. When developing a plan consider both internal and external resources. Internal communication channels are those that you have direct control over during an emergency. These include your website and established social media outlets (Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube), employee email, newsletter databases, and, for some larger localities, government access television. Tip: Immediately establish your website as a portal of information for the media and public. Create a page(s) to consolidate all information about the emergency, including news releases, flyers, photos, videos, or other resources you want to share with the media and the public. Posting your official message on these channels can also help correct any inaccuracies that may appear in external media channels. Various tips for optimizing your website for posting critical information can be found in Appendix 1.

External communication channels should be developed in advance. Spend time networking with contacts and developing comprehensive email lists for local and regional media outlets including the

Associated Press, law enforcement agencies, and public information peers in neighboring localities.

These relationships and email lists can become a lifeline in the event of an emergency.

Accept and/or Ask for Help: If your incident receives state or national attention the sheer number of phone calls from the media alone will be overwhelming. You need more than one person to answer the phones. During a crisis, there are also email messages to respond to, information to gather, press releases to write, speeches to prepare, and, in some cases news conferences to orchestrate. Don't attempt to do it alone. Often times, in the event of a major crisis, local, state, and federal police agencies, or neighboring governments will volunteer to send experienced personnel to help. Don't be shy about accepting assistance; you will need as much help as you can muster. Also consider reaching out to your own co-workers as these are people you already know and trust. Other resources to consider include your local school system (they often have at least one public information officer on staff), area businesses (such as public relations firms), and non-profit agencies. People are eager to help during a crisis so don't be hesitant to ask. Volunteers should be brought in as soon as possible to minimize the amount of "catch up" time during a developing situation.

Engage and Maintain the Media's Interest: Recognize the importance of working with the media. One of the best ways to develop goodwill is to communicate what you know about an incident as soon as possible via email or by phone. This ensures accurate information is made available to the public early on. It also establishes you and your staff as the point of contact for information. Continue to build your credibility throughout the crisis by anticipating the media's questions and issuing timely updates and photos as new information is available. If you don't have time to prepare a news release simply send a quickly worded email message with the latest information.

If you need to sustain the media's interest over an extended period time, for example when searching for a missing child, daily planning is crucial to ensure that substantial new information is made available to keep the story in the headlines. Understand the media's needs. If you have a situation with urgency and mass media interest consider holding press conferences where all reporters can be briefed at once. When releasing new information, consider media deadlines (especially when holding news

conferences). Best practices include releasing new information at 10 a.m. for 12 noon coverage, 4 p.m. for 6 p.m. coverage, and 9 p.m. for 11 p.m. coverage.

A Human Face: Determine who your main spokesperson(s) will be for the duration. Limit the number of people speaking in an official capacity to ensure your primary message remains consistent over time. Sometimes it may be desirable to use affected citizens or family members as part of your news conferences. If so, make certain these individuals are thoroughly briefed on what to expect from the media, and what answers they can provide.

Message Monitoring: Make sure you have access to television, radio, newspapers and the Internet to monitor the broadcast accuracy of your message. See Appendix 1 for tips on how to track your message as it spreads over the Internet and across social media networks.

News Conference Location: Establish a location for news conferences and live coverage by television and/or radio reporters. The location should be close to, but not within the emergency command center. A checklist of considerations for the location and equipment needed appears in Appendix 1.

EXECUTION

Message Management: In Roanoke County's case, our message was simple: "Find 12-year old Brittany Mae Smith." Early on, staff in the Public Information Office informed County staff and the media that the Public Information Office would be *the* point of contact for information pertaining to the search and investigation. Throughout the search phase, staff made a conscious effort to redirect inquiries about the murder investigation back to the primary message of "Find 12-year old Brittany Mae Smith."

Utilize All Available Resources: Below are some of the specific daily tasks performed by Roanoke County staff in managing this basic message across multiple media channels for the duration of the search:

- Notified internal Roanoke County staff and counterpart with Roanoke County schools about the situation. (The Roanoke County Public Schools Community Relations Specialist had a personal contact and notified CNN about the missing child.)
- Amber Alert received from Virginia State Police quickly posted to Roanoke County's social media channels (Twitter and Facebook) urging followers to RT (retweet/resend) the information.
- Following the Amber Alert, Public Information staff sent the first news release to the local, regional, and state media providing additional information about Brittany's disappearance.
- A central section of the County's website was established to host dated news releases, wanted posters, photos of 12-year-old Brittany and her alleged abductor, and background on the case. Because Roanoke County's web address is lengthy, staff created an easy to remember address for information - www.FindBrittany.com. The staff also created a quick-and-easy email address to relay tips to police - FindBrittany@RoanokeCountyVA.gov.
- When the search moved into the second day, staff determined that press conferences would be necessary as the situation became more urgent and there was growing interest by the media.
- After each press conference, the speeches and any additional details shared during the media briefing were converted to press releases. These releases were then posted to the County's website, distributed via the County's social media outlets, and emailed to the media.
- Used YouTube to post surveillance video showing Brittany and Jeff Easley buying camping supplies at a local store before they disappeared. (This video was viewed nearly 20,000 times by the public and picked up by national media outlets.) Some press conference video was also posted to YouTube.
- Coordinated distribution of key information to other local government social media sites.
- Helped the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children issue information to the media about the various states that were running electronic billboards with Brittany's picture to gain media exposure in those locations.

Message Monitoring: Staff monitored local and national coverage of the incident each day, noting the accuracy of each report. Staff also implemented Google Alerts with specific keywords about the case. These alerts allowed staff to track hundreds of Internet articles across the nation and overseas for accuracy and timeliness. When possible, phone calls were made to news outlets asking for a correction of any inaccurate reports.

Assistance: Roanoke County's Public Information Office, at the time of this incident, was staffed with three people – the Public Information Office Director, Web Content Manager, and Marketing and Information Manager. They considered themselves extremely fortunate that the Virginia State Police sent their PR Manager to assist with the County's communications efforts. Roanoke County welcomed the State Police expertise as well as that of personnel with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, and FBI who helped in daily message development. It was critical that the messages delivered during press briefings didn't anger Brittany's abductor for fear he would retaliate against her. Roanoke County's Public Information staff also welcomed help from staff with the County's government access cable station, County's Parks and Recreation Marketing Manager, and Community Relations Specialist for County schools. The help from all of these persons was invaluable.

Engage and Maintain the Media's Interest: Roanoke County used the Virginia State Police Amber Alert as part of its initial social media releases on Twitter and Facebook to increase the credibility of the alert. By asking approximately 3,000 fans/followers to repeat this message, the County was able to achieve more than 60,000 personal messages across the Internet on the *first day alone*. This tactic also reinforced the importance of this story to national media outlets that typically monitor social media.

Constant telephone communication with media outlets was crucial to maintaining the media's attention. Telephones were staffed more than 18 hours a day, with some calls from national media being answered during the overnight hours. And throughout the incident, staff collaborated with local police, Virginia State Police, and the FBI to ensure there was substantial new information each day to sustain ongoing media interest in the case.

A Human Face: Early on, Roanoke County Police Chief Ray Lavinder was established as the main spokesperson. Staff prepared Chief Lavinder's daily talking points for news conferences and compiled this information into news releases, which were posted to the website and County's social media pages. Staff also facilitated major broadcast media interviews for Chief Lavinder and other designated staff members.

Brittany's family members also participated in press conferences to appeal for her safe return. Staff worked with the family to develop their messages and prepare them for appearances in front of the cameras. For the duration of the search, updates were also emailed to Brittany's family to keep them informed of any new developments. This communication with the family served to gain the trust and cooperation of the family during the investigation.

News Conference Location: Established a location to hold daily press conferences (a total of 8 throughout the search) at Roanoke County's Public Safety Center (site of the Emergency Operations Center). Staff secured a podium, microphone, a small public address system, and mult-box for broadcast media from a local audio-visual equipment company. During a crisis, people are eager to help and the audio-visual equipment was provided to the County free of charge. The local CBS affiliate video streamed most press conferences on their website.

EVALUATION

Brittany was found safe in San Francisco, California on December 10, 2010. A woman who saw the story on CNN recognized Brittany panhandling outside a supermarket and alerted authorities. In addition, Easley was arrested and is awaiting trial on abduction charges. There can be no greater measure to evaluate the success of this plan. The plan in this case was directly achieved through use of local, state and national media.

Approximately one month after Brittany's return, Facebook announced plans to create 51 dedicated Amber Alert pages, one for each state and one additional page for the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. During the press conference, Virginia State Police Colonel W. Steven Flaherty

highlighted the search for Brittany as an example of how social media can reach thousands and help resolve a crisis situation.

The results in this case surpassed expectations. Within hours of the Amber Alert, social media promotion, and first press release, CNN picked up the case as part of its news coverage and the search was profiled that night on the Nancy Grace program. By planning for the sustained release of information, staff was able to maintain a media presence for the duration of the five-day search. Daily operations were measured by media response and pick-up by the major news organizations, and indirectly by the number of tips received. Over the five day campaign, 800 tips were either phoned in or emailed to police.

The primary message was picked up and sustained by Fox News, CNN, Nancy Grace, local and national ABC, CBS, and NBC stations, the Associated Press, radio stations, and countless newspapers as far away as the Daily Mail in London. In addition, Americas Most Wanted was prepared to feature the case and The Oprah Winfrey Show phoned and sent a formal letter seeking an interview with Brittany's family.

CONCLUSION

The communications plan developed by Roanoke County can be easily duplicated by localities of all sizes. It wasn't a complicated or expensive plan. The County's strategy maximized use of in-house staff, volunteers from other agencies, reliance on the County's website, email exchanges, free social media platforms, and a willingness to continually engage the media and anticipate their needs.