

Tool #4: Search-Support Services Provided by Nonprofit Organizations Addressing the Problem of Missing Children

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NPOs Addressing the Problem of Missing Children

Overview

Many nonprofit organizations (NPO) addressing the problem of missing children offer direct assistance to families searching for a missing child. NPOs are valuable sources of support and information for searching families; however, there are challenges specific to NPOs addressing the problem of missing and sexually exploited children. Previous Tools in this series discussed the decision to form an NPO addressing the problem of missing and sexually exploited children. This Tool discusses challenges specific to NPOs providing search-support services. Future Tools will discuss challenges specific to NPOs providing family-support services and those helping prevent and educate the community about missing and sexually exploited children.

When considering service delivery, NPOs must delineate their unique role in supporting the search effort for a missing child. Effective NPOs have learned the value of networking in order to bring resources into the search that may have otherwise remained unused. It is important to remember the NPO is not an investigative agency. It serves as a conduit for information that will aid the agencies responsible for conducting investigations. NPOs may also organize and

mobilize volunteers to support investigations of missing-child cases and provide valuable emotional support for searching families.

Examples of Services Offered

While NPOs are not investigative agencies they may offer significant support to the agencies responsible for investigating cases and recovering missing children. Some examples of services that may be offered by NPOs addressing the problem of missing children are noted below. To find examples of NPOs offering these services visit www.amecoinc.org, and from the home page click on the “Get Help Now” link. From this page click on the services you are interested in learning more about to see examples of organizations offering those services in their communities.

- **Developing and distributing missing-child posters.** NPOs may create their own missing-child posters or disseminate posters created elsewhere, such as by law enforcement, missing-child clearinghouses, or other NPOs. Each organization creating posters has their own criterion. Member organizations of the Association of Missing and Exploited Children’s Organizations Inc. (AMECO) have developed a position statement about missing-child posters. To view this statement visit www.amecoinc.org and from the home page respectively click on the “Position Statements” and “AMECO Recommendations for Missing Children’s Posters” links.
- **Notifying the community.** NPOs may work with media and community organizations to help publicize missing-children cases. This may include disseminating information about cases in the critical first few hours after a child is missing and/or raising awareness about longer-term missing children.
- **Helping with rewards.** NPOs may provide direct funds to finance rewards or assist families in setting up rewards.
- **Providing assistance in search and recovery efforts.** NPOs may provide on-site physical assistance to law enforcement and/or families in the search and recovery efforts in a missing-child case. This service may take a variety of forms, including coordinating community searches, providing volunteers, mapping search areas, and coordinating other search resources. Some NPOs work in conjunction with local law-enforcement agencies and as part of Child Abduction Response Teams (CART) to help recruit and train volunteers in preparation of a missing-child case in a particular jurisdiction. For more information about CART training visit www.amber-net.org, and click on the “Training Schedule” link.
- **Assisting law enforcement with analysis.** In conjunction with law enforcement NPOs may provide detailed inquiry or systematic analysis of information related to a missing-child case.
- **Supporting families during the search.** NPOs may provide basic needs as identified by the family during the search phase.
- **Providing case assistance.** NPOs may register and administer a missing-child case by providing a direct service, including acting as a liaison between families and law enforcement or media, and providing referrals for appropriate services and assistance.
- **Providing post-recovery support.** NPOs may assist families after the recovery of a child by providing referrals for professionals who may aid in the reunification process.

Precautions

The involvement of NPOs in missing-child cases should enhance efforts to locate and recover children. NPOs need to establish procedures for accepting cases and documenting the services they provide. Policies should include the information noted below.

- Require a copy of the missing-person report from law enforcement before accepting a case
- Require a copy of the custody report or other evidence of custodial rights in parental-abduction cases
- Maintain a log of every contact made in each case
- Have media-release forms signed before releasing photographs or any information to the media
- Identify a case contact at the law-enforcement agency investigating the case
- Organize a case file for each case
- Maintain contact with the searching family as long as the case is open
- Encourage families to also report a child missing with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® (NCMEC) to increase the awareness of and support for the missing child's case

New NPOs may benefit from the experiences of established NPOs — seek out NPOs and request their sample forms and policies. Most existing NPOs will share their materials and information with you. To get in touch with existing NPOs contact AMECO by visiting www.amecoinc.org or calling 1-877-263-2620.

The Importance of Working With Law Enforcement

The success or failure of an NPO addressing the problem of missing children may be directly related to the organization's working relationship with local law-enforcement agencies. The strength of this relationship will depend on the level of trust law enforcement has in the NPO.

The trust of law enforcement is built on respect for maintaining confidentiality of sensitive case information as well as addressing any concerns with investigations first with the agency and not airing them prematurely in the media — criticize in private; praise in public. Form a strong liaison relationship with the law-enforcement agency by seeking representation from law enforcement on the NPO's board of directors. Until a level of trust has been established the flow of information will likely be one-way with little in the way of information coming from the law-enforcement agency to the NPO.

Clearinghouses

State and Territorial Clearinghouses

Each of the 50 states, plus the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, U.S. Virgin Islands, Canada, and the Netherlands provide resources for missing children, their families, and the professionals who serve them through missing-child clearinghouses.

Missing-child clearinghouses are diverse in their delivery of services because of varying jurisdictional mandates and the variety of agencies in which they exist. The primary areas of focus for missing-child clearinghouses are networking, information dissemination, training development and delivery, data collection, and provision of technical assistance in cases of missing and sexually exploited children. NCMEC and missing-child clearinghouses closely work together to help ensure a comprehensive approach to child protection.

These clearinghouses serve as a valuable tool to assist families in the search for their missing child. Many clearinghouses are found within law-enforcement entities skilled in handling these specific types of cases and may be valuable resources and sources for support as families navigate the systems to seek out services and further investigative efforts. As an NPO, connecting with these representatives and establishing a liaison with them is advisable.

For more information about individual clearinghouses visit www.missingkids.com and from the home page respectively click on the links to “If Your Child Is Missing” and “Missing-Child Clearinghouse Program.”

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children

NCMEC was established in 1984 as a private, nonprofit organization. Per 42 U.S.C. § 5773 and other federal legislation NCMEC fulfills 20 core federal mandates including the operation of a national, 24-hour, toll-free telephone line by which individuals may report information regarding the location of a missing child and request information about the procedures necessary to reunite a child with his or her legal custodian; operation of the national resource center and information clearinghouse for missing and sexually exploited children; coordination of programs to locate, recover, or reunite missing children with their families; provision of technical assistance and training in the prevention, investigation, prosecution, and treatment of cases involving missing and sexually exploited children; and operation of a CyberTipline® for reporting Internet-related, child sexual exploitation.

A 24-hour, toll-free telephone line, **1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678)**, is available in Canada and the United States for those who have information regarding missing and sexually exploited children. For a list of other toll-free numbers available when dialing from specific countries visit www.missingkids.com, and from the home page respectively click on the “More Services” and “24-Hour Hotline” links. The CyberTipline is available worldwide for online reporting of these crimes at www.cybertipline.com.

NCMEC is a clearinghouse with which NPOs should be familiar and establish a liaison relationship. As a national organization with Congressional authorizations, NCMEC is poised to assist families and law-enforcement agencies. NCMEC works through their federal partnerships with AMECO members who are better equipped in certain situations to deliver grassroots- and community-based services.

Challenges Specific to NPOs Addressing the Problem of Missing Children

Confidentiality Issues

NPOs addressing the problem of missing children often have access to substantial amounts of confidential information. Confidentiality of sensitive information was touched on in a previous section, “The Importance of Working With Law Enforcement” and in “*Tool #2: How to Start a Nonprofit Organization*.” But confidentiality of information extends beyond law enforcement. NPOs may receive information about family circumstances, mental-health issues, medications, informant identities, and other information that if disclosed intentionally or inadvertently could expose the subject of the information to a range of consequences from embarrassment to physical danger. For this reason NPOs must enforce strict confidentiality policies.

While confidentiality is of paramount importance, NPOs cannot promise nondisclosure of the information it receives. Except in very limited circumstances, most information received by NPOs is not considered legally privileged — its disclosure may be compelled by the legal system. Misuse of the information may lead to serious legal repercussions and liability for the organization.

Retention, maintenance, and deletion of this information are other matters for consideration. Recent laws have been enacted to protect personally identifiable information (PII) and make liable those responsible for retention of this information in the event of identity theft. PII is information that may be used to distinguish an individual identity alone or when combined with other personal identifiers which link to a specific person. Policies regarding PII should be well outlined and NPOs should strongly consider requiring confidentiality agreements with staff members as part of the hiring process. For more information regarding PII visit the National Institute of Standards and Technology’s (NIST) Computer Security Resource Center website at <http://csrc.nist.gov> and from the home page respectively click on the “Special Publications (SPs)” and “sp800-122.pdf” links.

Need for Staff Support

Paid and volunteer staff members working to locate and recover missing children are often on an emotional roller coaster. Often staff members and volunteers of NPOs form close relationships with the families of missing children and become emotionally invested in these cases. The emotional highs and lows of this work may take a toll on the staff members and volunteers and NPOs need to include opportunities for them to address the stresses of this work.

The mental and emotional health of staff members and volunteers helping families in crisis is critical to the effectiveness of an NPO. Examine training opportunities about such topics as secondary trauma, burnout, and coping mechanisms for compassion fatigue. Some organizations require debriefings with staff members and volunteers after a case to address these tough topics and discuss possible concerns. Some organizations also assign supervisors for staff members and volunteers to help address these issues before they impact job functioning. Depending on the scope of the work, mandatory counseling or group sessions

may also be implemented. Being aware that this work may cause secondary trauma to those working with the NPO is a critical first step in circumventing serious, potential staffing issues. A healthy staff is better equipped to handle this emotional roller coaster. Remember, staff members and volunteers may experience this roller coaster with each case they work.

Communicating With the Media

One of the most valuable services an NPO may offer is maintaining contact with the media and keeping missing children's cases alive in the public arena. In fulfilling this role the NPO may need to walk a fine line between cultivating media contacts and respecting the confidentiality of information that should not be made public.

One of the first steps in building relations with the media is to develop a directory of media contacts. This directory needs to have the name of the contact, the position, the media organization represented by the contact, and as many different ways to contact the individual that may be identified — cellular-telephone numbers, facsimile numbers, and e-mail addresses. The contact list should also include each media organization's deadlines for submissions.

NPOs often develop media kits to support the public interest in the cases with which they assist. The media kit should include a photograph of the missing child, a brief summary of the case, contact information for the investigating agency, instructions for reporting sightings, and a fact sheet about the NPO with the contact information for the media liaison at the NPO.

Useful Resources

Association of Missing and Exploited Children's Organizations Inc. (AMECO)

1-877-263-2620

www.amecoinc.org

Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) National Crime Information Center (NCIC)

www.fbi.gov/hq/cjisd/ncic.htm or go to www.fbi.gov and from the home page type "NCIC" in the search function

National Association for Search and Rescue (NASAR)

1-877-893-0702

www.nasar.org

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC)

1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678)

www.missingkids.com

National Institute of Standard and Technology's (NIST)

Computer Security Resource Center (CSRC)

<http://csrc.nist.gov>

NCMEC Family Advocacy Division (FAD)

1-877-446-2632 extension 8373

Office of Children's Issues

1-888-407-4747

www.travel.state.gov/abduction

Team HOPE

1-866-305-HOPE (4673)

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