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# NJ police to issue Amber Alert in family disputes

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The Associated Press

EWING, N.J. - Family disputes will be considered now in New Jersey's revamped Amber Alert, a child abduction broadcast system that varies from state to state.

Attorney General Paula Dow said Wednesday that State Police will issue alerts in abduction cases in which the abductor is believed to be a parent or family member of a child. Issuance of an alert in family disputes previously had been discouraged to prevent misuse.

Dow says the new criteria should eliminate confusion over when alerts are needed.

"I believe the criteria will make our plan a stronger one and will make our children safer," Dow said.

To start, dispatchers will use an updated checklist that standardizes the questions asked in determining whether to issue an alert, said State Police Lt. Col. Gilbert Thomas.

"It's not as though we have the horses waiting in the gate for an Amber Alert before we do anything. Time is always of the essence in a situation like this." Thomas said.

Police will consider whether a family member has a history of violence or mental illness, is believed to be armed or is under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

Since its inception in 2004, New Jersey has activated 13 alerts, said Paul Loriquet, a spokesman for the Attorney General's office.

Data on the existence of an Amber Alert policy similar to New Jersey's was not available from analysts at the National Conference of State Legislatures, which last conducted an analysis in 2002, a spokeswoman for the conference said. The National Center for Missing and Exploited

Children does not keep policy data, but a manager with the Center said the program has been a victim of its own success.

"It's so successful that people think it should be for everything," said Bob Hoever, the center's manager of programs and a New Jersey State Police retiree. "I think what's important for people to realized that there are other tools out there to find missing children. Amber alert is just one."

Despite a federal law meant to create a uniform alert system, an Associated Press review in 2008 found wide variations in what merited an Amber Alert from one state to the next. The review found that 12 states would not issue an alert when a parent calls police amid a custody fight.

The New Jersey revision follows the disappearance of 3-month-old Zara Malani-Lin Abdur-Raheem. Prosecutors say her father abducted her and threw her from the Driscoll Bridge in February.

East Orange police notified other law enforcement agencies about the abduction, but did not request state police to activate the Amber Alert system. Police were unsure whether the father meant to harm the child.

Dow said she doesn't believe an alert would have made a difference in the case.

State Police are awaiting DNA results to determine if a baby's body found along the Raritan River on Saturday is Zara. The clothing on the infant was consistent with a description given when Zara was reported missing.

The attorney general said she does not think the changes will mean more Amber alerts will be issued. A big increase in the number of alerts issued may weaken confidence in the program by the public, which police rely on for leads.

"I'd like to know that we took one step in closing up the response time and clarifying that there should be no hesitancy in this area of familial abductions," Dow said.

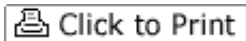
When an alert is activated, information about an abducted child is broadcast on radio and TV and posted on electronic highway message boards.

All 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands have Amber Alert plans.

More than 500 children have been returned to their parents since the plan was first created in 1996, following the kidnapping and murder of 9-year-old Amber Hagerman of Arlington, Texas.

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