

Controversial or not, change is needed

EDITORIAL

Ontario's Amber Alert system is in dire need of a revamp. But likely not for the reasons you're thinking.

A quick social media search last week would have brought up hundreds, if not thousands of posts from people across Ontario chiming in with their thoughts, both positive and negative, on a system that was designed, and implemented for the sole purpose of saving lives. Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it?

So, how is it that something meant to only do good, can be so completely polarizing amongst the general public? We have more than a few suggestions.

First of all, when an Amber Alert is issued an immediate notification is supposedly sent out to all cell phones registered within the province the alert originates. So, let's take last week's example, when Toronto Police issued an alert shortly after midnight on Thursday (March 5) in an attempt to try and locate 14-year-old Shammah Jolayemi, who had been abducted early on Wednesday morning.

That alert, originating in Toronto, was, supposedly, sent out to all cellular devices and cable TV channels across Ontario. People who live in Thunder Bay, 1,400 kilometres away, received the alert. That doesn't make a whole lot of sense.

Amber Alerts, in our opinion, should be limited to territories, say within a 250 kilometre radius of the initial incident. That should, strictly speaking, only alert individuals capable of assisting in a search or investigation? Providing the initial alert is sent out in a timely fashion.

Which brings us to point number two. By the time last week's Amber Alert had been distributed, young Shammah had already been missing for the better part of 16 hours. While his school's failure to advise his parents he had been missing from school that day meant he wasn't reported missing until around 5:30 p.m., witnesses had apparently called police at the time of abduction and it shouldn't have taken police long to put the pieces together and figure out what, likely, had happened. Had an Alert gone out earlier in the evening, those within the vicinity would have had a much better chance of identifying the vehicle involved in the abduction.

Another issue with the current system is the apparent inconsistency in which messages are delivered to cellular devices. A quick poll in the Citizen office determined that not everybody received the Alert. Some received it twice. One person even received it three times. So, that begs the question, why isn't something that is so important correctly programmed so as to ensure every device that is supposed to receive the message receives it at the exact same time? It can't be a difficult code to master. Various scam artists, and spammers have been doing it for a long, long time.

Now, for perhaps the most controversial of our suggestions. It's already been identified that the Alert system, in its current format, is polarizing. Right or wrong, there are those who are generally ticked off because the Alert has woken them up. While some will argue that, with a child's life on the line, waking up potentially millions of people is a small price to pay, we have seen it suggested that Alerts, such as the one that occurred last week, can have catastrophic impacts the next day.

?What if somebody is woken up by an Alert, is unable to get back to sleep and is then forced to drive into the city for work the next morning. What if that person falls asleep at the wheel and causes an accident?? ? yes, that was one remark made to us during a community poll we conducted prior to writing this piece.

There's no evidence to suggest such a hypothetical instance has occurred, but it does raise the question, for some people, regarding whether these alerts, potentially, could do more harm than good.

On that front, we suggest a change in the way people are notified of Amber Alerts. Right now, a startling holy-crap style of alarm is used in an attempt to draw people's attention to their phones. We feel strongly that this system does not work.

Out of ten people polled following last week's alert, only one could correctly identify Shammah Jolayemi by name. Three people identified where Shammah had gone missing. Incredibly, and this is the most telling, nine of those polled admitted they didn't read the Alert when it first came in. Of those nine, five were still awake at the time the Alert was rolled out.

That, to us, suggests there's a major disconnect between what this system is, and what it's supposed to be. People, seemingly are ignoring Amber Alerts en masse. While that's absolutely not okay, it creates another problem in the sense that, if there is a major catastrophic emergency, in line with a natural disaster or impending nuclear doom, a lot of Ontarians, apparently, aren't going to know about it, because they have conditioned themselves not to worry when the holy-crap alarm goes off, as it's likely 'just another Amber Alert'.

That doesn't sit well with us, but it is the reality of the situation. That sound currently used for Amber Alerts, should probably be reserved for potentially large-scale catastrophic events.

Amber Alerts certainly have a place in today's society, and they have been proven to bring about positive outcomes in missing kid cases across the country. We simply feel there's work to be done if we are to improve the system moving forward.