

Missing and Endangered Persons Information
Clearinghouse Advisory Board

MISSING & ENDANGERED

FALL 2021
Issue 5

Missing Endangered Persons Information Clearinghouse
Advisory Board
2331 Phillips Road
Tallahassee, FL 32308
<https://www.fdle.state.fl.us/mcicsearch/AdvisoryBoard.asp>

AS OF 12/1/2021, THERE
WERE:

**10 AMBER Alerts with 10 Recoveries in
2021**

**45 Missing Child Alerts with 40
Recoveries in 2021**

**259 Silver Alerts with 252 Recoveries in
2021**

**SO FAR IN 2021, 30 RECOVERIES WERE
DIRECTLY ATTRIBUTED TO THE FLORIDA
ALERT SYSTEM.**

A subject is **recovered when he or she has been located alive and well,
and re-united with family. You can locate current missing person alerts by
visiting FDLE's [Missing Endangered Persons Information Clearinghouse](#).*

What is MEPICAB?

The Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) Missing Endangered Persons Information Clearinghouse Advisory Board (MEPICAB) was created in 1996 to address issues dealing with Florida's missing children. The MEPICAB is a diverse mix of law enforcement officials, victims' parents, government agencies, missing children non-profit organizations, and community members interested in missing children issues.

The Missing Endangered Persons Information Clearinghouse Advisory Board's mission is to support awareness, education and training for the prevention, response and recovery of missing and endangered persons.

The Advisory Board meets quarterly to discuss and implement plans and policies to combat and create an awareness of the large number of children that go missing every year. Board members are chosen by FDLE's Commissioner from around the state to provide a balanced representation of Florida.

Want to support Florida Missing Children's Day?

Florida Missing Children's Day (FMCD) is an annual ceremony that is held the second Monday of September each year to honor the families of missing children as well as law enforcement officers and citizens who have made significant contributions protecting Florida's citizens.

Any person, business or agency interested in donating to the Florida Missing Children's Day Foundation can visit the FMCD Foundation [website](#).



2021 Florida Missing Children's Day

This year's Florida Missing Children's Day ceremony was held in Tallahassee. The annual event is held to remember Florida's missing children, recognize the state's efforts in child protection, and to educate Floridians on child safety and abduction prevention.

In 2020, more than 24,000 incidents of missing children were reported to Florida law enforcement agencies, while 34 Missing Child Alerts and 19 AMBER Alerts were issued statewide. Since its inception, 269 AMBER Alerts have been issued, including 10 this year. Florida AMBER Alerts have directly aided in the rescue of 77 children.

Governor Ron DeSantis said, "Florida's children are the future of our state and society, and we must work to protect them. On Missing Children's Day, we raise awareness about children whose fates are unknown and whose parents hope for the best despite suffering unimaginable grief. I know that every day our law enforcement officers put themselves in danger to protect Florida's children and seek to reunite those who are missing alongside Florida's child advocates. We thank them for their work."

First Lady Casey DeSantis said, "Our children are our world and neither I nor the Governor can contemplate the unfathomable pain that families of missing children must experience daily. There are so many Floridians who are dedicated to finding missing children and bringing to justice those who are implicated in their disappearances. I am thankful that these men and women follow every clue on the path to reuniting children with their families and by working together we will continue to foster hope for their loved ones."

Attorney General Ashley Moody said, "As a mother, I cannot imagine the horrific pain of not knowing where your child is or if they are safe. My heart goes out to every family going through this tragic nightmare. As we recognize Missing Children's Day in Florida, I want to thank all of our law enforcement agencies for their tireless efforts to return these children home. Justin and I continue to pray for the safe return of all missing children and the strength and safety of our law enforcement officers and others working to reunite families with their loved ones."

Florida Chief Financial Officer Jimmy Patronis said, "As a father of two young boys, finding out your child is missing is every parent's worst nightmare. The pain that these moms and dads go through every day without their children is heartbreaking. I'm proud of the work of our law enforcement community to ensure children are kept safe and that any child that goes missing is brought home."

Florida Commissioner of Agriculture Nikki Fried said, "Any time a child goes missing it is a tragedy that lives in the hearts of their families and our communities forever. Today and every day, we must remember these children and continue to raise awareness and educate communities about child safety. I'm grateful to all of our brave law enforcement officers who work every day to protect and rescue children and reunite them with their families."

FDLE Commissioner Rick Swearingen said, "The continued vigilance of Florida's citizens is one of the best tools we have for protecting our children. From sharing active AMBER and Missing Child Alerts on social media, to signing up to receive email or phone notifications about new alerts, to the actions of everyday heroes like today's award winners, I am grateful for the efforts of our fellow Floridians who help to safeguard our children and work to safely bring them home."

During a formal ceremony, Commissioner Swearingen recognized citizens, K-9 trailing teams, and law enforcement officers for their exemplary efforts in missing children investigations. The Florida Missing Children's Day award winners are highlighted on the following pages.

2021 Florida Missing Children's Day Award Winners



The John and Revé Walsh Award is traditionally presented to an individual who has made significant contributions to the issue of missing children and the engagement of the community in child safety efforts.

This year's winner is Ms. **Judy Thigpin**. Over the last 30 years, she and her K-9s have assisted in over 300 missing person and missing deceased searches. Judy declines compensation for her work and always responds to requests for assistance, often working in rough conditions. She responds to requests on short notice, always conducts herself in a professional manner, trains on her own time to keep her K-9s certified, and donates her travel time and equipment to the search.

The Commissioner's Award recognizes an individual or organization who has made outstanding contributions toward ending child abductions. It honors those who work tirelessly in the fields of safety and prevention education for children.

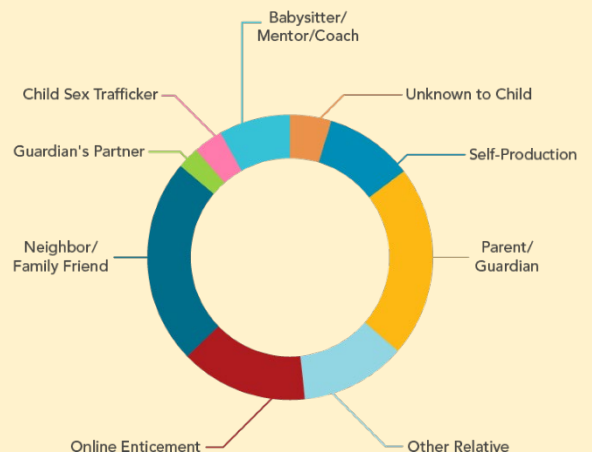
This year, the Commissioner's Award recognizes multiple winners who cooperated in Operation Stolen Innocence: Tallahassee Police Department's Investigator **Elizabeth Bascom**, Investigator **Paul Osborn**, Investigator **Mark Ray**, Homeland Security's Special Agent **Eric Eick**, Assistant State Attorney **Lorena Vollrath-Bueno** and Assistant United States Attorney **Michelle Spaven**.

The investigation started when an investigator discovered a child victim on an electronic advertisement. The victim was recovered, and an investigation into affiliated phone and social media accounts yielded thousands of pages of evidence relating to crimes against children. The evidence discovered 596 individuals who had communicated with a minor. The team cooperated in obtaining evidence, interviewing witnesses and suspects and preparing charges. Between November 2018 and November 2020, this investigation yielded 435 charges on 177 suspects.



Over **2,100** children are depicted in imagery considered "actively traded," meaning the images or videos have been seen in multiple reports
*According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children

Relationship of offender to child in actively traded images and videos.



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Evelyn Williams was a long-time analyst for FDLE's Missing and Endangered Persons Information Clearinghouse. She passed away in 2003 after a brave battle with cancer, leaving behind a legacy of dedication and commitment to FDLE and the Clearinghouse. The Evelyn Williams Memorial Award recognizes an unsung hero who has made major contributions to the safety and protection of Florida's children.

This year's Evelyn Williams Memorial Award winner is Detective **Jason Carter**. Detective Carter works for the Coral Springs Police Department's Special Victims Unit and is involved with the South Florida Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force and the FBI's Child Exploitation and Human Trafficking Task Force. In January 2020, Detective Carter worked over 150 hours in a two-week period in support of Super Bowl Human Trafficking Operations which resulted in the recovery of four juveniles who were being trafficked and three federal arrests. In addition to this investigation, Detective Carter investigated an adult who was extorting and threatening minors for illicit photographs and videos. The investigation located victims across eight states and included 80 victims between the ages of 10 to 14. The suspect was arrested, fined, categorized as a sexual offender for life, and sentenced to 30 years in prison.



The Local Law Enforcement Officer of the Year Award winner is Deputy **Royce James** of the Volusia County Sheriff's Office.

In February 2021, a 13-year-old girl was reported missing after not showing up to an afterschool event. The guardian of the child was told by the child's friend that the child had been picked up by an unknown male whose name may have been "Tyler." With only this information, Deputy James began checking hotels with a photo of the victim and the name "Tyler." Eventually, at one hotel, he found a possible suspect who had checked in earlier. Deputy James immediately investigated the hotel room.

As soon as the door was opened and the victim saw Deputy James, she ran to him and hugged him. Deputy James stayed with her through the investigation. The Deputy's determination to not view this case as a runaway juvenile saved the victim from further harm.



The Federal Department of Justice challenges fifth graders across the nation to participate in a poster contest for the National Missing Children's Day. Each state selects a single, statewide winner to compete at the national level. Florida's poster winner is **Ms. Kelsey**. Her poster was used to help create this year's Florida Missing Children's Day billboard, pictured to the left. This billboard was shown around the state and has pictures of Florida's missing children.

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This year's School Bus Operator of the Year is Ms. **Naesha Williams-Mathis**.

Ms. Williams-Mathis was driving her usual Leon County school bus route when she spotted an unaccompanied toddler holding a bottle in the middle of the road. Ms. Williams-Mathis stopped the bus, extended the STOP arm and opened the bus doors. She took the child's hand and escorted the child onto the bus's front seat before she called the incident into dispatch and waited for law enforcement to arrive. While they waited for law enforcement to arrive, Ms. Williams-Mathis spoke softly to the child and sang the child songs. The middle school students in the bus stayed quiet while the toddler was on the bus. The child was returned safely.

The Law Enforcement Task Force or Team of the Year Award is presented to a team of law enforcement officers who made incredible strides in protecting Florida's children. This year's winners are part of the Hillsborough County Sheriff Office's **Selective Operations Section**.

The Selective Operations Section spent the last year and a half conducting numerous undercover operations with the goal of eliminating human trafficking in their area. During this time, they arrested 12 subjects on human trafficking charges and, most importantly, rescued two unreported missing juvenile victims. Detectives were also able to rescue and provide services to 17 adult victims. They were able to identify subjects who prey on minors on internet applications, and made 65 arrests for various felony charges related to solicitation of juveniles. Five of the arrested subjects were registered sexual offenders.



Florida Missing Children's Day takes the opportunity to teach children how to take charge of their own safety and the safety of their brothers, sisters, and friends. Each year, we ask fifth grade students from across the state to write an essay entitled "This is How I Stay Safe All Day." The goal of this contest is to encourage thoughtful conversation and constructive and practical safety practices among the students with their parents, teachers, and friends. After facing some intense competition from fifth graders all across Florida, Ms. **Belinda** is this year's essay contest winner.



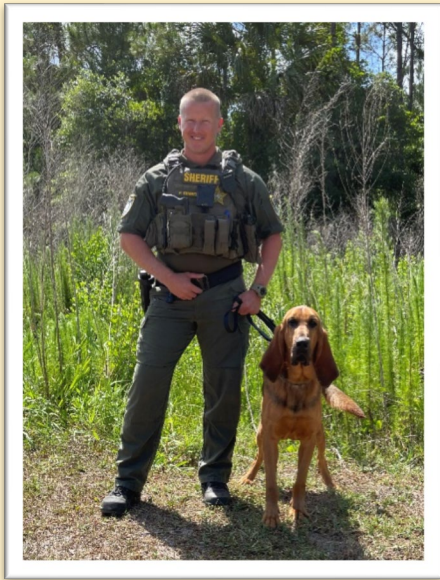
This year's Citizen of the Year Award goes to Mr. **Robert Riley** of Waste Management.

Mr. Riley was servicing an RV park where he noticed a toddler wandering the park near a roadway. After several minutes of observation with no parent nearby, he approached the toddler, who was barefoot, and called 911. Mr. Riley was able to prevent the child from suffering an injury, and the child was returned safely.

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After the kidnapping and murder of their son, Jimmy, Don and Claudine Ryce dedicated much of their time, energy and resources to preventing child abductions and protecting Florida's children. One of many significant contributions is the Ryce family's donation of bloodhounds to local law enforcement agencies. An immediate and rapid response when a child is kidnapped or goes missing is crucial, and K-9 units have become an invaluable tool in mounting an immediate, effective response to child abductions.

And so, each year, Florida Missing Children's Day honors a K-9 unit with an award bearing Jimmy's name. This year's Jimmy Ryce Trailing Team of the Year Award goes to Sergeant **Frederick Gimbel** and **K-9 Holmes** of the Flagler County Sheriff's Office. In June 2020, Sergeant Frederick and K-9 Holmes were deployed to assist in locating a child with autism. Sergeant Gimbel and K-9 Holmes initially searched the immediate area where the child went missing while a scent article was obtained from the child's home. After the scent article was obtained, K-9 Holmes pursued the trail through brush fields and wood lines until the juvenile was located under a large tree. Once the child was located, Sergeant Gimbel recognized that the child was uncomfortable with the K-9 and immediately removed Holmes from the situation.



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This year, we are recognizing two State Law Enforcement Officers for their outstanding work. The award goes to the Florida Highway Patrol's Trooper **Darran Morgan** and Corporal **David Flores**.



The State Law Enforcement Officer of the Year Award goes to Trooper **Darran Morgan**. While conducting a routine traffic stop, he noticed a juvenile in the passenger seat. Trooper Morgan believed that this juvenile may be missing or in a possibly compromised position. He obtained the juvenile's mother's contact information and called her; the mother did not yet know she was missing and was being taken out of the state. Due to Trooper Morgan's insight, the child was returned home before a missing person report could be filed.

The State Law Enforcement Officer of the Year Award also goes to Corporal **David Flores**. Corporal Flores was flagged down by a frantic mother whose 3-year-old child had wandered off while playing with other children. Corporal Flores immediately reported the incident to his command chain and proceeded to canvas the neighborhood and ponds in the area. Corporal Flores was able to locate the child a few streets away from where he went missing within six minutes of the mother flagging him down. The child thankfully did not sustain any injuries and was safely returned to his mother.



The Combatting Human Trafficking Award is presented to individuals who have demonstrated a profound contribution to human trafficking issues in Florida.

This year's award goes to Trooper **John Ellerbee** of the Florida Highway Patrol. In April 2020, a suspect fled from a vehicle into the woods and was identified through the abandoned vehicle's information. The suspect had multiple felony warrants out for his arrest and an investigation was started. Multiple search warrants were executed and the suspect was located and arrested. Through Trooper Ellerbee's dedication and work, it was determined that the suspect was a violent felony offender of special concern and was in possession of firearms and drugs and involved in human trafficking and production of child pornography. A missing juvenile was recovered as a result of this investigation and other juvenile victims were identified. The suspect was charged federally for his crimes.

The Young Hero Award is presented to a child in Florida who displayed extreme bravery to save themselves or a peer from danger. We are proud to recognize Ms. **Laura** for successfully preventing herself from being exploited and also obtaining evidence to charge the suspect.

Ms. Laura was approached at a local convenience store by an adult who wished to solicit a minor. Ms. Laura informed the suspect that she was a minor, and when that did not deter the suspect, she began to record the interaction and seek help from the store clerk. Ms. Laura was able to record the illegal request of soliciting a minor, providing her age, and the suspect stating he did not care she was a minor. This information led to the suspect's arrest.

Florida's Silver Alert Anniversary

October 8th marked the 13th anniversary of Florida's Silver Alert program. Since the program's inception in 2008, 2,721 Silver Alerts have been issued, and Florida's Silver Alert program has been directly responsible for 268 recoveries of missing senior citizens.

Silver Alerts are activated statewide at the request of local law enforcement after a senior with Alzheimer's disease or related dementia (ADRD) goes missing in a vehicle. Once a Silver Alert is issued, information about the missing senior is communicated to the public through local media outlets, lottery terminals, and highway message signs.

"We see successful Silver Alert recoveries each month because our partners quickly and effectively share critical information, which citizens respond to," said FDLE Commissioner **Rick Swearingen**. "The Silver Alert program makes the public our most valuable partner in saving the lives of our missing senior citizens."

"The Silver Alert has been, and continues to be, an essential program that helps older adults with ADRD stay safe," said Department of Elder Affairs Secretary **Richard Prudom**. "We know that of the 5.5 million residents in our state age 60 and older, that more than 580,000 individuals live with Alzheimer's disease alone. The State of Florida has made researching and ending Alzheimer's disease and all dementias a top priority, so it's important we continue to support programs like the Silver Alert as our population ages."

Through coordinated state and local efforts, Florida's Silver Alert program has gained the reputation of being an effective and necessary tool that has encouraged communities to participate in locating our missing elders.

Missing persons 60 years of age and older who have irreversible deterioration of intellectual faculties such as Alzheimer's disease or dementia are eligible for Silver Alert activation. Once the person has been recovered, the Department of Elder Affairs, in coordination with the Area Agencies on Aging and Florida's Memory Disorder Clinics, work to provide follow-up assistance to the senior.

Citizens can learn more about the program and sign-up to receive Silver Alerts via email at www.floridasilveralert.com.

National Statistics

1,053 children have been successfully recovered as a **direct** result of the AMBER Alert program as of December 31, 2020*.

Of the more than 26,500 cases of children reported missing in 2020 who had run away, **1 in 6** were likely victims of child sex trafficking*.

The overall national missing child recovery rate in 2020 was **92%***.

*According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children; more information can be found on their [website](#).