



**AMBER
ALERT**

ORGANIZING AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY CANVASS

Get Started Early

For a successful child recovery, it is important that a community canvass is organized early and is well publicized throughout the community. Community canvassing should be directly linked to community relations as there have been well-documented cases where the failure to launch a canvass early has led to negative publicity due to an impression that agencies are not working diligently on successfully recovering the missing person. With the increasing role of social media in day-to-day life, any negative perceptions of how a case is being handled can spread quickly and without opportunity to dispute the claims. Not only does organizing a community canvass quickly ensure more accurate information from witnesses, but it can preempt negative publicity and allow more time and energy to be spent on recovering the child successfully.



Importance of Identifying Witnesses

Witness testimony can be crucial in establishing a starting point for a physical search, successfully recovering the child, and building a strong legal case against the person responsible. Community members have often witnessed an aspect of the incident without knowing what they were witnessing. Research has shown that in 40% of missing child cases reviewed, there was an “unknowing” witness. In 30% of abduction cases, the witness was able to provide a physical description of a suspect before the suspect was identified. Overall, clearance rates in missing child cases increase by 15% when a physical description is obtained from a witness.

Steps to Organizing a Community Canvass

Recruit and Screen Volunteers

- **A door-to-door canvass can help to identify potential witnesses and recruit volunteers to assist with the ongoing search.**
- **Volunteers should be over the age of 18.** Although children may be eager to help – especially if their friend or schoolmate has gone missing – the physical challenges of the search may pose a risk to minors. Furthermore, if a child has been abducted, children involved in the search may also be at risk of abduction.
- **Minors may be able to assist in the early stages of a search by helping to identify “Areas of Interest” where young people in the area are known to spend time.**
- **Adult volunteers should be screened for suitability based on knowledge of the area, relationship to the missing child, and physical ability to assist in the search.**



Establish a Command Post

Once a search party has been assembled, a command post should be established in a centralized, and easily accessible location. The command post should be used to establish ground rules and procedures for the canvass and to inform volunteers of the pertinent facts in the case.

- **Supplies, such as flashlights, maps, and crow bars can be distributed from the command post to assist with the search.** However, volunteers should preferably supply these items themselves.
- **Cell phones are a valuable way for volunteers and canvass coordinators to stay connected during the search.** Keep in mind that when searching in remote, rural locations, cell phone coverage may be sporadic. In such cases, walkie-talkies are an effective way of staying in communication.

Canvassing in Native Communities

When canvasses are conducted in Native Communities, it is essential to take into consideration the traditions, norms and practices of those who live there, as well as proper jurisdictional procedures.

As reservations are sovereign nations, close coordination with local Tribal authorities is crucial in any canvass conducted in a Native community. It is important that Tribal leaders are consulted early and kept informed of the ongoing status of the search if possible. The Tribal administration or council may also be able to assist by providing resources, such as office space for a command center, or accommodation for volunteers.

Consideration should always be given to the particular jurisdictional issues that may exist in any given area. Ensure that not only the appropriate Tribal Administration leadership, but also the appropriate Tribal law enforcement leadership are engaged before conducting any canvassing activities. Law enforcement agents from outside the community are often assisted by partnering with professional or volunteer Tribal police officers. Remember to take advantage of retired police officers or others who may be able to assist.

Planning for Success

Having a plan for establishing a community canvass can make an immense difference in the successful recovery of a missing child. By following the steps as outlined above, the family of the missing child and the wider community will be reassured that every possible measure is being taken to resolve the case.

Sources

- Hanfland, K., Keppel, R. and Weis, J. (n.d.). "Investigative Case Management for Missing Children Homicides" [PDF file]. Available from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/digitization/201253ncjrs.pdf>.