

Meet the Mover and Shaker Behind Nevada's Amber Alert Effort

In this edition of Child Talk, we sit down and chat with Bob Fisher, the President and C.E.O. of the Nevada Broadcasters' Association, a Las Vegas VIP who works to improve the well-being of Nevada's children through his work with our broadcasters. Bob explains the workings of the Nevada Amber Alert system.

“All of us are safer because of Amber Alert”

Interviewer: You serve as the head of the Nevada Broadcasters' Association. What is your actual title and what does the position encompass?

Fisher: The original title was Executive Director, and because a person in my position has to meet with different levels of players in our community the Board felt that being President and C.E.O. would put me on more of an even level playing field. As the C.E.O. of the Nevada Broadcasters Association, I represent almost all of Nevada's television and radio stations, I guess our primary role is to protect the licenses of each of our stations, which makes us a great resource for issues with Congress and with the Federal Communications Commission. Sometimes there are state issues. We also provide programming and services, and a tremendous amount of resources and information. That in a nutshell is what I do. It's as if it's an umbrella organization for all of Nevada's T.V. and radio stations.

Interviewer: What experiences and skills did you bring to the job when you first started?

Fisher: I was fortunate that the Board of Directors, while not knowing really what they wanted, had certainly focused on certain skills that I could bring to the table. One of them was, I was, in my previous job, working on the West Coast for an organization that also was operating out of the East Coast, so I was asked, could you work together with various aspects of the State of Nevada. And I said if I could bring New York City and Los Angeles together, then I certainly could work to bring Reno and the rural areas and Las Vegas in together. Second of all, I came from the world of non-profits, and the majority of our funding comes from the time that we sell to not-for-profit organizations and government organizations, so my second background was in the area of non-profits. And the third was a variety of different talents whether it was leadership skills, or fundraising, just being able to sit down and conduct a meeting. Like I said, the Board didn't necessarily know what they wanted, because I interviewed them, after my initial few minutes with them, I interviewed them for about an hour. But together we have established now our game plan.

Interviewer: How long have you been with N.B.A.?

Fisher: On September 2nd, I started my fifteenth year.

Interviewer: The Nevada Broadcasters' Association is involved with the Nevada Amber Alert system. How did that partnership come about?

Fisher: That's a good question, and it's a question that a lot of people do not know the answer to. The truth of the matter is that when Amber Alert first started outside of Dallas, Texas, I'm not sure that anyone ever thought, or had the vision to see that it would eventually be a national or an international program. The reason why I am so involved, and the Nevada Broadcasters Association is so involved, is that the truth is it was the broadcasters associations that brought Amber Alert into many, if not most, of the states. So that the first plan actually was in Oklahoma. The Oklahoma Executive Director, Carl Smith, became really the advocate to spread Amber Alert into all of the states. So my direct role is because of the fact that myself and Adrian Abbott were responsible for bringing Amber Alert into the State of Nevada, in partnership with then Attorney General Frankie Sue Del Papa, and the Office of the Attorney General. And that partnership still exists today, a number of years later.

Interviewer: How did that happen here in Nevada? How did the establishment of the Amber system first begin?

Fisher: It actually first began in Northern Nevada, and it was named after Crystal Steadman, so it was known as the Crystal Alert in Northern Nevada. For whatever reason, the powers that be, especially in law enforcement in Southern Nevada, had different ideas, and Amber Alert was not one of them. What happened was Attorney General Frankie Sue Del Papa said we really need to do something about Amber. But what she did not know was that Adrian Abbott and I had started the rebuilding of the Emergency Alert System throughout the State of Nevada, and especially in Southern Nevada. Because the key to Amber Alert, the initial activation of Amber alert is through the Emergency Alert System, beginning with radio, and then going into television. But we were in no position to bring Amber Alert into the State of Nevada until we had, really, the strength of the Emergency Alert system.

At the same time, we met with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, here in Las Vegas, and set up a plan of what we were going to do, and how we were going to do it. We were very fortunate that during the crazy period of time when everybody was jumping on the Amber Alert bandwagon, we had a governor by the name of Kenny Guinn who yielded to our request that we not bring Amber Alert into the State of Nevada until it was ready. And ready meant writing a plan that would be good for Northern Nevada, for rural Nevada, for Southern Nevada. And so what happened was we sat down with different law enforcement officials, from all around the State of Nevada, and literally wrote, word by word, line by line, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, page by page. When the plan was done, and when everybody signed on to the plan, we felt that we were where we needed to be. That is when we then went to the State of Nevada, and requested that there actually be a statute that would create the Amber Alert in the State of Nevada, and also we demanded that there be some source of review. We felt that that was very important. That also was included in the statute. So when the law was passed, when the law was signed, when the bill was signed into law, we then were ready to go. And thanks to the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, a few weeks prior, they actually called an Amber Alert, because it was the middle of the

summer, and there was a child who was missing and was being locked up in an automobile, and Sergeant Tom Wagner at the time made the call and said we're ready, and you know what? We were.

Interviewer: What is N.B.A.'s role in the Amber effort here in Nevada?

Fisher: Sort of as a gatekeeper. Meaning that we try to ensure that the broadcasters are kept abreast and buy into and participate actively in Amber Alert. We do not, however, make any calls for activation. That's why I said we're really a gatekeeper. Because in the State of Nevada, individual law enforcement agencies have the ability to activate Amber Alert. We changed after about the first year, when we began to have problems with some of the Amber activations coming in from California. That policy then became part of the plan that if anyone from out of state called and requested an Amber Alert activation, it had to go through the Department of Public Safety.

Interviewer: How do Amber Alerts work? How is the process initiated?

Fisher: If you would have asked me the question five years ago, I would have been able to give a very simple answer. Law enforcement makes the determination that an Amber Alert is to be activated. They then will call the LP-1 station either in Northern Nevada, in rural Nevada, or in southern Nevada, and request an Amber Alert activation. I don't want to go through certain things that that are really probably confidential, but there is a system in place between the LP-1 radio station and the law enforcement agencies calling, so that when it is actually an authentic alert request, then what will happen usually within minutes is that the local law enforcement agent, the official, or the PIO will actually record the Amber Alert message, and that is what will go out on the radio, on television.

I said now if you would have asked five years ago, in addition to that today, the world is very different even in five years. An activation can come from your cell phone, an activation can come on your computer. An activation can come by fax. It's very exciting how technology is being partnered in with what was just radio and television. I should also mention that one of the partners which has done a great job are not only the billboards but the electronic billboards, because the electronic billboards can be updated literally as soon as we have new information.

Interviewer: Do those billboards act like a computer on my desk at work?

Fisher: Yes. So It's actually very easy for, let's say Clear Channel Outdoor, to place the photo of the child, or the photo of the suspect, and information can be updated as easily as it can be updated on your computer.

Interviewer: That sounds like an amazing tool. Has it ever happened that an Amber Alert issued over a digital billboard, has resulted in a recovery of a child?

Fisher: Well, the best story that we have in the State of Nevada and it actually is relatively recent, I believe it was only last year, that a car was stopped, I believe, by the Highway Patrol, and when the highway patrolman realized who was in the car, and the man said "I don't know what you're talking about", he kept on making excuses, and something like "How did you know it was me?" And the highway patrolman looked up, and about ten feet away from him was a billboard and he said that's the reason why, buddy.

Interviewer: What was displayed on the billboard?

Fisher: The man's picture. And the information.

Interviewer: How many children in Nevada have been recovered through these activations of the Emergency Activation System?

Fisher: Without looking at my files I'm not really sure because we make a distinction between different kinds of recoveries. If it's a California Amber Alert activation, and the child was found in California, although we will list it on our timeline, as having been required, it isn't the same as let's say a child who is abducted in California and is found in Hawthorne, Nevada. Plus the fact and they're not, many of them, there have been abductions in Nevada, and recoveries in Nevada. I'm not sure of the exact number; I would say approximately 30.

Interviewer: And what is that number nationally?

Fisher: The number I believe just went over 400.

Interviewer: 400 children recovered through the Amber Alert system?

Fisher: Yes.

Interviewer: And does Amber Alert exist in every state?

Fisher: Yes. Amber Alert exists in every state. Amber Alert exists in Canada, and the time will come when Amber Alert will be in parts of Mexico, because there have definitely been cooperation between some law enforcement in Mexico in returning children that have been abducted into Mexico. Canada also attends the Amber Alert conferences, and we expect that Amber Alert will go on to places like England, and then spread throughout Europe.

Interviewer: What does the future hold for the Nevada Amber Alert system?

Fisher: The future holds a lot of work because there's a lot of work to be done. I think that our priority for the future is, how do we embrace the new E.A.S.? How do we embrace the new technology? How do we fully embrace the new technology that we haven't even imagined yet? Is there a way that we can have a smoother, easier, faster

Amber Alert activation. It is possible. At the same time, there's a lot of work to be done always in terms of training. I think that our number one priority is certainly going to training. And I think that we're always looking at our plan to make sure that it is up to date, and that we learn from our mistakes.

But as long as you asked the question, I also have to give this answer as well: it is only an Amber Alert. Meaning that it has very, very strict criteria, and because of that we only have usually two or three Amber Alert activations during an entire year. Part of the reason why we address that criteria, which is also them future, is that we do not want to spoil the Emergency Alert System. Because that's also the tool to notify the public in case of fire, a tornado, earthquake, floods, terrorist attacks. So the broadcasters protect the E.A.S., and law enforcement protects the integrity of the Amber Alert itself, and who should be activated, and who should not. That was a very painful decision, But the criteria is really a national criteria, and I think the future will be good, because one of the great things that has happened—two things: Number one, tremendous partnerships between law enforcement and the media, that used to be a really love-hate relationship, and I think that Amber Alert has really helped tremendously in terms of our partnership. And second of all, through Amber Alert, the Emergency Alert System has been strengthened, not only in the State of Nevada, but all around the country. And that means that all of us are safer because of Amber Alert.

Interviewer: Bob Fisher of N.B.A., thank you.