



# Department of Justice

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## **JUSTICE DEPARTMENT OBSERVES NATIONAL MISSING CHILDREN'S DAY**

### ***Department Honors Law Enforcement Officers, Citizen, for Efforts to Rescue Missing and Exploited Children; Poster Contest Winner Announced***

WASHINGTON – The Department of Justice today recognized the Maryland Internet Crimes Against Children task force, Detective George R. Higgs of the Charles County Sheriff's Office in La Plata, Maryland, Detective John Witherspoon of the Montgomery County Police Department in Rockville, Maryland, and Colin Blevin, a private citizen from Santa Clara, California, for their efforts to help children.

Acting Associate Attorney General Jesse Panuccio presented the awards during the Department's National Missing Children's Day ceremony. The annual awards ceremony is hosted by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in the Office of Justice Programs (OJP).

“The exceptional individuals we recognize today remind us of our responsibility to be vigilant about the safety of our children and to hold accountable those who seek to harm them,” said Acting Assistant Attorney General Jesse Panuccio. “Because of the diligence, courageousness, and selflessness of the awardees, as well as their commitment to protect the most vulnerable among us, children all over the country are safer in their communities. The Department of Justice is proud to honor these heroes, and I am proud to stand with them today.”

The ceremony included recognition of Eden Hoffmann, a fifth grader at Huron Elementary School in Clinton Township, Michigan, whose poster illustrating the theme, “Bringing Our Missing Children Home,” was chosen as this year's National Missing Children's Day poster contest winner.

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Acting Associate Attorney General Panuccio presented the following awards:

**Attorney General's Special Commendation:** This commendation recognizes the extraordinary efforts of an Internet Crimes Against Children task force or affiliate agency for making significant investigative or program contributions.

**Recipients:** The Maryland Internet Crimes Against Children task force for their investigation resulting in the arrest of a sexual predator who assaulted at least 26 victims, some dating back to the 1970s, and recorded the sexual abuse. The suspect was charged with multiple sex offenses involving the abuse of a child.

**Missing Children's Law Enforcement Award:** This award recognizes the extraordinary efforts of a law enforcement officer who made a significant investigative or program contribution to the safety of children.

**Recipient:** Detective John Witherspoon of the Montgomery County Police Department in Rockville, Maryland, who tirelessly investigated a runaway child case that ended with the discovery of the child's murder. Witherspoon worked with local police in another jurisdiction to identify and arrest 10 gang members for their role in the murder. He then coordinated witness relocation for the victim's mother after she received death threats from gang members.

**Missing Children's Child Protection Award:** This award honors the extraordinary efforts of a law enforcement officer who made a significant investigative or program contribution on behalf of missing, abused or victimized children.

**Recipient:** Detective George R. Higgs of the Charles County Sheriff's Office in La Plata, Maryland, who led an investigation that resulted in the arrest of a suspected sexual predator and the identification of 42 adolescent victims. He also helped prosecutors bring three indictments against the suspect, which led to 219 charges of sexual assault, production of child pornography, and other charges.

**Missing Children's Citizen Award:** This award honors the extraordinary efforts of private citizens for their unselfish acts to safely recover missing or abducted children.

**Recipient:** Colin Blevin, a Santa Clara, California, resident, for his actions to recover an abducted infant and help police apprehend the child's kidnapper. Blevin prevented the suspect from escaping with a one-year-old child in a stolen car and protected the child until police arrived. The offender was sentenced to more than five years in prison for felony child abuse and vehicle theft.

President Ronald Reagan proclaimed May 25, 1983, the first National Missing Children's Day in memory of Etan Patz, a six-year-old boy who disappeared from a New York City street corner on May 25, 1979. Missing Children's Day honors his memory and the memories of children still missing. Although Etan's killer was convicted in February 2017 for the 1979 murder, his case remains active with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children because his body was never found.

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In 2017, there were 464,324 missing children entries in the FBI's National Crime Information Center. Additional information about [National Missing Children's Day](#) is available online.

The Office of Justice Programs, headed by Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General Alan R. Hanson, provides federal leadership in developing the nation's capacity to prevent and control crime, administer justice and assist victims. OJP has six bureaus and offices: the Bureau of Justice Assistance; the Bureau of Justice Statistics; the National Institute of Justice; the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention; the Office for Victims of Crime; and the Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering and Tracking (SMART). More information about OJP and its components can be found at [www.ojp.gov](http://www.ojp.gov).

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