



Department of Justice

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(202) 514-2007
TTY (866) 544-5309

JUSTICE DEPARTMENT OBSERVES NATIONAL MISSING CHILDREN'S DAY

Department Honors Law Enforcement Officers and a School Bus Driver for Efforts to Rescue Missing and Exploited Children; Announces Poster Contest Winner

WASHINGTON – The Department of Justice today announced awards to nine courageous individuals, which include law enforcement officers from Wisconsin, Louisiana and Florida, as well as a school bus driver from Florida, for their efforts in finding missing children and bringing child sexual predators and child pornographers to justice.

“The Department of Justice is proud to honor the law enforcement officers and private citizens who showed courage, presence of mind, and an unwavering commitment to protecting children from dangerous predators,” said Attorney General William P. Barr. “We thank these heroes, whose actions made it possible to bring to justice those who attempted to exploit our most innocent and vulnerable citizens.”

“The safety, indeed the very lives, of our nation’s children depend on constant vigilance by skilled professionals and citizens willing to keep a watchful eye on the young people in their charge,” said Katharine T. Sullivan, Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General for the Office of Justice Programs. “The honors we confer on these exceptional individuals come with our highest respect and our deepest gratitude.”

President Ronald Reagan proclaimed May 25, 1983, the first National Missing Children’s Day in memory of 6-year-old Etan Patz, who disappeared while walking to his bus stop in lower Manhattan on May 25, 1979. National Missing Children’s Day honors his memory as well as those children still missing. Etan’s killer was convicted in February 2017 for the 1979 murder, but the case remains active with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children because his body was never found.

Today’s announcement is part of the 37th annual commemoration of National Missing Children’s Day. Due to restrictions resulting from COVID-19, the in-person ceremony to honor the recipients has been canceled. Instead, this [website](#) features information about the awardees and statements from Office of Justice Programs Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General Katharine T. Sullivan and Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) Administrator Caren Harp.

“The vigilance of these law enforcement officers demonstrates the crucial need for dedicated and timely investigative work in stopping those who would hurt children,” said OJJDP Administrator Caren Harp. “We applaud them for returning the missing children, holding sex offenders accountable and stopping further child victimization.”

The recipients of this year’s awards are honored with the following:

Attorney General’s Special Commendation: This commendation recognizes the extraordinary efforts and significant investigative or program contributions of an Internet Crimes Against Children task force or affiliate agency, or an individual assigned to either.

Recipients: Criminal Investigation Director Matthew Joy, Commander of the Wisconsin Department of Justice’s Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force in Appleton, Wisconsin, and Special Agent in Charge Jesse Crowe, Supervisor of the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force for the Western District of Wisconsin. Director Joy and SAC Crowe led an urgent search of a house and located a missing 14-year-old girl. She had been transported across state lines by a suspected child molester with whom she had been chatting online. The man received a sentence of 11 years and 3 months in federal prison.

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

Recipient: Ms. JoAnn Donovan of Punta Gorda, Florida. When a 15-year-old girl with special needs did not board the school bus that picked her up at her foster home, she was reported missing. As part of their investigation, officers interviewed Ms. Donovan, the bus driver, who told police that the girl had recently been talking on her cell phone with her biological mother, from whose custody she had been removed. An alert yielded a photo of the girl and her mother passing through a tollbooth in another state. Police returned the girl to her foster family unharmed just one day after she went missing, and her mother will spend two years in jail.

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

Recipient: Senior Inspector Gerald Dysart of the U.S. Marshals Service, New Orleans, Louisiana. Mr. Dysart provided the expertise and guidance for Operation Empty Nest in Atlanta, Georgia, which recovered 16 missing children over a span of two weeks. Among the recovered were children who were victims of sex trafficking, exploitation, and sexual and physical abuse.

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

Recipients: Detectives Chastity Burke, Dennis Miller, Detectives Keith Earney, Jason Turner, Ruben Escobar and Eugene Mefford, all of the Child Exploitation Unit at the Volusia County Sheriff’s Office in Daytona Beach, Florida. The six detectives rescued two child victims within six hours of executing an emergency search warrant. The suspect was found with the preschool girls, with whom he had appeared in a disturbing video provided to the detectives. A

forensic examination of the suspect's phone showed hundreds of images and videos of child pornography. He was arrested for child molestation and possession of child pornography.

The Department also recognized Elliana Conrad, a fifth-grader at the Antonia Crater Elementary School in Newberg, Oregon, winner of this year's National Missing Children's Day poster contest.

In 2019, the FBI's National Crime Information Center included 421,394 entries for missing children. Additional information about [National Missing Children's Day](#) is available online.

The Office of Justice Programs, directed by Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General Katharine T. Sullivan, provides federal leadership, grants, training, technical assistance and other resources to improve the nation's capacity to prevent and reduce crime, assist victims and enhance the rule of law by strengthening the criminal and juvenile justice systems. More information about OJP and its components is located at www.ojp.gov.

The year 2020 marks the 150th anniversary of the Department of Justice. Learn more about the history of our agency at www.Justice.gov/Celebrating150Years.

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