

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-4606

December 20, 2022

The Honorable Glenn Youngkin
Governor of Virginia
1111 East Broad Street
Richmond, VA 23219

I write to you today regarding the Commonwealth's execution of the Ashanti Alert program.

In 2018, Virginia enacted the Critically Missing Adult Alert Plan, also known as the Ashanti Alert, following the tragic death of Ashanti Billie, a 19-year-old who was abducted in Norfolk, Virginia and whose body was discovered 11 days after she was first reported missing. Because Ashanti was too old for an Amber Alert to be issued and no similar network for adults existed at the time, her parents, family, and friends struggled to get word out of her disappearance in a timely fashion.

I was proud to champion the bipartisan passage of the federal Ashanti Alert Act and have subsequently secured federal funding for its implementation across the country every year since its enactment. Today, almost half of all states have a similar alert system that meets the requirements of the federal Ashanti Alert program.

Virginia has the opportunity to be a national leader in implementing this program, but I am concerned about recent use of the system. Since the alert's enactment in 2018, there have been eight Ashanti Alerts issued in Virginia. Data provided by the Virginia State Police (VSP) indicates that, of the eight alerts, three victims were safely located, three victims were found murdered, and two victims are currently unaccounted for. Based on these results, it seems that the Ashanti Alert, as currently implemented, is not living up to its full potential.

The story of Marie Covington underscores this concern. Ms. Covington was last seen on August 17, 2022 at 9:57pm and was reported missing to Virginia Beach Police (VBP) by her family on August 18, 2022 at 10:25pm. Despite Covington's disappearance meeting the activation criteria, VSP did not issue an Ashanti Alert until August 20, 2022 at 9:50pm – two days after she was reported missing.^[1] In that time period, police had already located her car, which was driven by the individual who was later arrested for her murder. The Ashanti Alert was issued only two hours before she was found deceased.^[2]

I know you share my goal of ensuring that we do everything in our power to make sure missing persons in Virginia are returned home safely. To that end, I am seeking the following information from your office:

1. What proportion of missing persons cases result in the issuance of an Ashanti Alert?

^[1] <https://www.wavy.com/news/investigative/marie-covington-died-of-gunshot-medical-examiner-finds/>

^[2] <https://www.wavy.com/news/investigative/marie-covington-died-of-gunshot-medical-examiner-finds/>

2. In a specific case, who is responsible for making the determination that “abduction poses a credible threat,”^[3] as required by the Ashanti Alert program?
 - a. What policies govern the substance of this determination?
 - b. What policies govern the timing of this determination?
 - c. Were these policies revised as a result of the delay in the Covington case?
3. Why was an Ashanti Alert not issued in the Covington case until two days after Marie Covington was reported missing?
4. In the seven cases for which we do not have data, how much time elapsed between the missing person report and the issuance of an Ashanti Alert?
5. Who has general oversight authority over the implementation of the Ashanti Alert law?
 - a. If there is no state official with this authority, why not?

The Ashanti Alert program was created to facilitate cooperation and improve communication between public safety entities, with the ultimate goal of saving the lives of endangered individuals. To that end, it is imperative that Ashanti Alerts in Virginia be issued promptly to maximize their effectiveness and serve their purpose. Thus, I seek your cooperation and that of relevant state agencies and stakeholders in ensuring that the Ashanti Alert program succeeds in preventing future tragedies and protecting the safety of Americans.

Sincerely,



Mark R. Warner
United States Senator

^[3] <https://vsp.virginia.gov/news-and-alerts/alert-programs/critically-missing-adult-alert/critically-missing-adult-alert-plan-components/>