



## Highway Message Signs - Florida



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### *Can your agency display information if an officer is shot or killed?*

Imagine one of your officers engaging in a traffic stop when the driver exits the vehicle and fires 24 rounds from an AK-47. This is exactly what happened one September evening in 2004, to Officer Keenya Hubert. Despite being struck twice, Officer Hubert was able to radio for help and crawl to safety. Her police vehicle erupted in flames.

Homicide detectives handling the investigation had a good description and tag information from the vehicle due to the fact that Officer Hubert provided the information to the dispatcher as she made the traffic stop. The detectives requested that the information on the vehicle be displayed on the highway messaging signs since it was likely the subject would be fleeing the area. The request was denied by the Florida Department of Transportation because the highway signs were not legally authorized to be utilized for that purpose.

On May 05, 2008, Governor Charlie Crist signed an executive order creating the Florida LEO ALERT PLAN. This order now authorizes the use of the messaging signs to be utilized for specific cases when an officer is killed or seriously wounded. The order directs the Florida Department of Transportation and the Florida Highway Patrol to coordinate with the Florida Department of Law Enforcement in broadcasting information via the signs.

In recent months, the law enforcement community nationwide has experienced an increase in law enforcement officers being killed or seriously injured. This past year, 181 officers were tragically killed in

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the line of duty, while 1,671 officers have been killed in the line of duty during the past 10 years. Many of the criminals in these cases have used motor vehicles to flee the scenes. With these tragedies in mind, a procedure needed to be developed that would allow local agencies to use the Florida Department of Transportation's Dynamic Messaging Signs to alert motorists to critical vehicle description information, including license plates, as they use Florida's Turnpike and other state highways.

Using the Amber Alert model, which has been very successful throughout the country, the Florida Law Enforcement Officers (LEO) Alert Plan was created.

The Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE), in conjunction with the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) and the Florida Highway Patrol (FHP), has established the Florida LEO ALERT PLAN.

The purpose of the Florida LEO ALERT plan is to broadcast critical information of offender(s) who have killed or seriously injured a law enforcement officer. If the offender is not apprehended immediately, that person could pose a significant risk to the public. It is important to be able to provide this important information to the general public as quickly as possible via FDOT's highway Dynamic Message Signs and other highway advisory methods.

In the event the offender(s) is seen or if anyone has knowledge on the identity of the offender(s), that information can be provided immediately to the investigating law enforcement agency.

The Florida LEO ALERT PLAN can assist in dramatically increasing the chances of capturing the offender(s) rapidly before he or she can leave the State of Florida.

#### **CRITERIA:**

To activate the alert, the following four criteria must be met:

- The offender(s) killed or critically injured a law enforcement officer.
- The law enforcement agency's investigation must conclude that the offender(s) pose a serious public risk.
- There must be a detailed description of the offender's vehicle to broadcast to the public (photos will be used when available).
- The activation must be recommended by the local law enforcement agency of jurisdiction.

*Note: To activate FDOT's Dynamic Message Signs, enough vehicle descriptive information, along with a complete or partial tag number to benefit a broadcast on the signs, must be available.*

#### **PROCESS FOR ACTIVATION:**

The activation process must be followed in this order:

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- The local law enforcement agency will call the Florida Department of Law Enforcement / Florida Fusion Center (FFC) desk in Tallahassee, Florida. The FFC desk is staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and is the point of contact for LEO ALERTS.
- An on-call special agent supervisor will work with the local law enforcement agency to determine whether the case meets the criteria and to offer additional help if needed. An on-call FDLE FFC analyst will work with the FDLE FFC duty officer if the request comes in after hours.
- The FDLE will work with the local law enforcement agency of jurisdiction to determine if the information is to be displayed on FDOT's Dynamic Message Signs in a regional or statewide manner.
- The FDLE will work with the local law enforcement agency of jurisdiction to prepare information (including suspect(s), and/or vehicle, contact information, etc.) for public distribution using approved formats.
- FDOT will provide the approved template to be used, including vehicle description, tag number and any other identifier.
- If FDLE determines that the FDOT Dynamic Message Signs are to be used, then FDLE will contact the FHP Communications Center Shift Commander in Orlando, Florida, in order to alert duty officers and other call takers of the LEO ALERT.
- The FDLE will then fax all available information concerning the LEO ALERT to the FHP Communications Center in Orlando. The FHP Shift Commander in Orlando is then responsible for relaying all information via telephone and fax to the other shift commanders at the appropriate FHP Communications Centers in the region(s) where the activation is occurring.
- The FDLE will then contact FDOT's Orlando Regional Transportation Management Center (RTMC) to develop the content of the message to be used. FDLE will then fax the actual DMS message to the Orlando RTMC, using the attached format.
- The Orlando RTMC staff will relay the request to the appropriate RTMC staff in the state to activate the Florida LEO ALERT Plan. The DOT will then display the message until the offender(s) is captured or for a maximum of six hours. FDOT will display the alert message on all requested Dynamic Message Signs unless a traffic emergency occurs that requires an individual or group of the signs to display a motorist safety message. FDOT will record a brief LEO Alert message on the 511 System. The 511 System is used only when the Dynamic Message Signs are displayed.
- FDLE will follow the same activation steps listed above if an additional activation is required containing revised vehicle information and/or broadcast area.
- Once FDLE is informed that the offender(s) has been captured, the FDLE will immediately contact the shift commander at FHP and FDOT to cancel the alert. The FHP shift commander in Orlando is then responsible for relaying the cancellation information to the shift commanders at the FHP communications centers that originally were notified.

### **THE REVIEW PROCESS:**

Each activation will be brought before a special committee of state agency partners and law enforcement representatives to ensure that the program's goals are being met and that each activation meets the criteria and is conducted in a timely manner.

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**OTHER RESOURCES:**

Local media outlets

Local Crime Stopper organizations

Officer Hubert survived her encounter in 2004 and has bravely resumed her duties. Her assailant was subsequently arrested and convicted. Her case exposed a flaw in the highway messaging system in Florida which has now been repaired and will assist in capturing other violent offenders in the future.

Now is the time to determine if you will be able to engage the message alert system in your locale should the need arise, following an officer being shot. If not, take steps now to ensure that you will have this investigative tool available if one of your officers is killed or seriously wounded. You might be surprised to learn that you will need legislative or government action to engage the use of these signs.

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