

Gastonia Police Department

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Mother speaks to the press and \$10,000 reward offered in the search for Maddox

Maddox's mother spoke to the press at a news conference today with law enforcement and fire officials. Carrie Ritch pleaded for the public to help find her little boy asking anyone who saw him to come forward, "I just want my baby home."

Maddox's father, Ian Ritch, was not at the news conference today, because he was at the park with investigators to provide as much information as he could about the moments he last saw Maddox.

Law enforcement and fire officials talked about the ongoing search. The FBI announced a \$10,000 reward for information that leads to the direct location of Maddox, and asked people on social media or other groups not to spread false rumors.

"It's been nearly 75 agonizing hours since 6-year-old Maddox Ritch disappeared," Gastonia Police Chief Robert Helton said. "We do not want another hour to pass without finding this child and bringing him home. All the help has been humbling."

Since Saturday, more than 260 law enforcement investigators, agents, analysts, and other personnel have been working around the clock, Helton said. More than 150 leads have come in, hundreds of interviews have been conducted, and surveillance video from stores all over the area has been reviewed.

Gastonia Fire Chief Phil Welch talked about the thousands of acres of land that have been searched on foot, ATVs, and by boat. "We search the park completely all over again each day," he said. And the search area has been extended. The Charlotte Fire Department also brought in a pontoon boat equipped with a special sonar and additional divers. Drones flew over multiple areas and specially trained dogs searched for additional clues to find Maddox.

But Maddox has not been found.

"In particular, some of the witnesses we have spoken to saw a professional photographer and we want to talk to him," Helton said. "He's described as a white male in his early 30's. He was

taking photos of three white children dressed in Doctor Seuss costumes, and holding balloons. Both their parents were there as well. We want to talk to the photographer and the parents. There was also a male jogger nearby who hasn't been identified and we want to talk to him as well.

“These people may be valuable witnesses,” Helton said. “Even if you think you don't know anything that can help, call us and let us decide. There were a lot of children in the park Saturday, including some other little blond-haired boys wearing orange shirts, but we need to know if you saw OUR blond-haired boy in an orange shirt.”

Police have been asked why an Amber Alert has not been issued. The information investigators have developed does not meet the criteria for issuing an Amber Alert as detailed on the North Carolina Department of Public Safety website; see the link <https://www.ncdps.gov/our-organization/law-enforcement/state-highway-patrol/amber-alert/amber-alert-criteria>. Law enforcement officials are in contact with the North Carolina Center for Missing Persons which issues the alerts and have confirmed the criteria cannot be met at this time. The agency is on standby to issue an alert if additional information is developed to meet the criteria.

“Rumors on social media are hindering our investigative efforts,” FBI Supervisor Jason Kaplan said. “When someone shares a post that is not factual it can pull valuable resources away from the investigation. Please, be responsible on social media and look for confirmed, official information from the Gastonia Police Department or the FBI.”

If Maddox's family decides to speak again on camera, they will organize that with law enforcement officials, they will not speak to reporters individually on camera. They ask for your prayers and privacy.

The special tip line number is 704-869-1075.

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