



Solving Missing Persons Cases

by Beth Pearsall with Danielle Weiss

The National Missing and Unidentified Persons System has helped agencies solve cases and allowed families to find resolution.

In June 1995, 16-year-old Toussaint Gumbs of Virginia went missing. Relatives said he had last been seen on June 9.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children became involved, creating posters, searching public records, collecting DNA samples and contacting offices and agencies across the country. The years went by and efforts continued, but investigators found no sign of the boy.

In March 2008 the Virginia medical examiner's office uploaded details on its unidentified decedent cases into the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System. One case entered was that of a man estimated to be 18-22 years old; his body had been found on June 6, 1995.

A volunteer with the Doe Network (a volunteer organization devoted to helping solve cold missing persons cases) was reviewing cases in NamUs and came across the two

profiles. Despite the differences between the date of last contact of the missing boy and the date the unidentified body was found, the volunteer noticed likenesses in the two cases' physical descriptors. She also noticed that both cases included a description of a unique scar on the left thigh.

The volunteer reported these likenesses to NCMEC. DNA testing later confirmed the match — the unidentified "man" was, in fact, the missing boy.

It began with a need — the need to improve access to critical information for those who can help solve missing persons and unidentified decedent cases.

With an estimated 4,400 unidentified human remains cases every year¹ and close to 100,000 active missing persons cases on any given day,² the nation needed a central

repository for case records. Therefore, the National Institute of Justice created NamUs, the first national repository for missing persons and unidentified decedent records accessible to law enforcement agencies, medical examiners, coroners and the public. More than 2,000 missing persons cases and more than 5,000 unidentified decedent cases have already been entered into NamUs, and the numbers continue to grow.

Improving a Fragmented System

“Before NamUs, it was more of a haphazard, disjointed, localized effort,” said Mike Murphy of the Clark County Coroner’s Office in Las Vegas.

Some local agencies had Web sites dedicated to helping identify remains or solve missing persons cases in their jurisdictions. Clark County, for example, has had its own site on unidentified dead since 2003. Yet according to Murphy, when his agency first started the site, it was unaware of similar sites: “We didn’t know that other sites existed, and we were in the business. If we didn’t know, then the public certainly didn’t know they existed.”

Randy Hanzlick, medical examiner at the Fulton County Medical Examiner’s Center in Atlanta, said that people were working in a “fragmented system” made up of sites created by state and local agencies and nonprofit groups.

“Often you had to go to multiple Web sites for information,” Hanzlick said. “And while there were some sites that have tried to collect information on cases from all over, the coverage was often incomplete.”

Several federal databases also have relevant information: the National Crime Information Center, the Combined DNA Index System for Missing Persons, the Integrated Automated Fingerprint Identification System and the Violent Criminal Apprehension Program. Yet many of the nation’s 17,000 law enforcement agencies lack the time and resources to enter data on missing persons and unidentified human remains cases.³

In May 2009 NamUs received an Excellence in Technology Award from the International Association of Chiefs of Police.

Take NCIC for example. The Federal Bureau of Investigation’s computerized database contains criminal justice information — including missing persons and unidentified decedent cases — and is available to law enforcement agencies. NCIC, however, suffers from a low rate of reporting.⁴ An estimated 40,000 sets of human remains are still unidentified in America. On December 31, 2008, only about 7,100 unidentified person records had been entered into NCIC.⁵

Carla Tippie Proudfoot, director of the Maryland Missing Persons Clearinghouse, described the problem in state terms. “There are now 242 unidentified deceased cases entered into NamUs for the state of Maryland,” Proudfoot said. “Only 54 cases are in the NCIC database.”

As for missing persons, cases involving people 18 years old and younger must be reported to the NCIC database, but reporting adult missing persons cases is voluntary. Only a handful of states have laws that require law enforcement agencies to prepare missing persons reports on adults, thus compounding the problem of inconsistent reporting in the federal database.

NamUs: A ‘Needed Bridge’

NamUs is helping to close the circle by providing a national online repository for both missing persons and unidentified decedent records.

“NamUs is the nexus of all the work that was being done independently,” Murphy said. “It is a ‘one-stop shop’ where law enforcement, medical examiners, coroners, families, anyone who is involved and touched by a missing persons case can go for information.”

Anthropologist Tony Falsetti at the University of Florida noted that with NamUs, there is finally a central place to get information.

“This is the first time we have had a central system that everyone can use and access. We are all on the same page, looking at the same info, and that is truly important.”

“Say unidentified remains are found in a large county in Florida and the profile is entered into NCIC. If a missing persons report is filed in a smaller county in the state, those two pieces of information may never meet for a number of reasons, resources being one. Now [with NamUs] the two sets of information will talk to each other,” Falsetti said.

This applies to interstate cases as well. Todd Matthews, a system administrator for NamUs, said the site is useful for cases that involve more than one state. According to Matthews, “These cases often fall to the side — missing from one place, lived in another.”

“I’m seeing cases come in that had no other avenue until now,” he added.

Matthews describes NamUs as a “needed bridge” between law enforcement agencies, medical examiners, coroners and the public. “This is the first time we have had a central system that everyone can use and access. We are all on the same page, looking at the same info, and that is truly important,” he said.

The lines of communication that NamUs has set up are also important, Matthews said. “Before, we had to create ways to communicate with other people,” he said. “Now there are official liaisons between the groups, and we are in an almost constant state of communication,” he said.

An Active Role for Families

Public participation is a critical part of NamUs. Family members, friends and colleagues can access and search the databases to help find missing loved ones.

“The most important part of NamUs is that it joins together families and all of the other disciplines that may be involved in a missing persons case,” Murphy said. “In the past, the different disciplines working on a case told families just to wait and they would let them know when information was available. NamUs gives families a place to be. It makes them feel like they are now part of the solution.”

“Before NamUs, families with missing loved ones would have to call every coroner and every medical examiner in the country,” Proudfoot said. “After a while, it gets time-consuming, expensive and extremely frustrating making all of those calls.” Hanzlick added that family members often felt handcuffed in terms of what they could do when looking for a loved one.

“The databases that did exist [before NamUs] were not searchable — you had to scroll down and read everything,” Hanzlick said. With NamUs, people can get customized searches for specific features such as tattoos and crowns on teeth, significantly decreasing the number of possible related cases.

In addition, those who register can receive an automatic e-mail telling them when case information has been updated. “With older cases, there hasn’t always been the opportunity to provide feedback to families,” Falsetti said. “Part of the hole that NamUs fills is providing constant feedback to stakeholders, whether it’s the detective on the cold case or the mother whose daughter is missing.”

“The addition of the public is really going to drive this,” Falsetti added. “This is an opportunity for families to participate within the system. Now they are actively participating to identify missing persons.”

Rick Jones, a coroner investigator in the Clark County Coroner’s Office, stressed the importance of families playing an active role. “Families need to be part of the team,” Jones said. “In light of certain record-retention policies, you can’t just assume

that DNA and fingerprint samples and dental records are going to be around long term. It is crucial that families be involved in helping to secure this information.”⁶

“Each unidentified case that comes through our doors is a person with a family that most certainly has been waiting to hear from their loved one,” Jones added. NamUs is helping to produce new information on these cases, allowing his office — and offices around the country — to get one step closer to identifying remains and bringing loved ones home.

Take, for example, a recent case in Maryland. In 1994 Maryland police found a deceased male with extensive injuries to his face. No identification was made at the time. In March 2008 Proudfoot, who was helping the state medical examiner’s office load its cases into NamUs, entered the case information. She also asked a forensic artist to create an image of the man’s face using old photographs found in the original missing person file.

In September of the same year, an improved image of the man’s likeness was added to the NamUs case profile. A local newspaper ran a story about the case and included the new image. Within two weeks, a woman contacted Proudfoot, saying she believed the man in the story was David Riddick, her missing nephew. Further investigation confirmed this, and the previously unidentified man was finally sent home.

“NamUs was instrumental in getting this case solved and bringing some resolution to the man’s aunt,” Proudfoot said.

More Improvements

The NamUs databases are just one part of a broader program to improve the nation’s ability to address missing persons and unidentified decedent cases.

Thanks to partnerships across the country, NamUs now provides free forensic services. A network of anthropologists is available to help investigators and agencies that may not have these professionals on staff or

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access to those services. In addition, agencies may have free DNA testing through the University of North Texas Center for Human Identification to add to NamUs records and further improve the chances that a match will be found.

NIJ also provides family reference-sample kits, at no charge, to any U.S. jurisdiction. These standardized collection kits provide a safe, effective and noninvasive means for gathering family members’ DNA, which can help identify people.

Continuing to Help Families Find Peace

“When we talk with families who have a missing loved one, they say that you keep searching every day for that person. You see someone on the street, and you quicken your step to catch up with them, thinking maybe, just maybe. You experience the exhilaration that it could be them ... and then the disappointment when it turns out that it’s not,” Murphy said.

“Families with missing loved ones keep searching and searching and searching — they are never going to give up,” Proudfoot added. “NamUs has the potential to let a lot of families out there know what happened to their missing loved ones and begin to find some peace.”

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NCJ 228382

Notes

1. Hickman, M.J., K.A. Hughes, K.J. Strom, and J.D. Roper-Miller, *Medical Examiners and Coroners' Offices, 2004*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, June 2007, <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/meco04.pdf>.
2. As of December 31, 2008, the National Crime Information Center database contains 102,764 active missing person records. Federal Bureau of Investigation, *NCIC Missing Person and Unidentified Person Statistics for 2008*, Washington, DC: Federal Bureau of Investigation, <http://www.fbi.gov/hq/cjisd/missingpersons2008.htm>.
3. For more information on these federal databases and the challenges surrounding them, see Ritter, N., "Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains: The Nation's Silent Mass Disaster," *NIJ Journal* (256): January 2007, <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/journals/256/missing-persons.html>.
4. Office of Justice Programs, "About NamUs," Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, <http://www.namus.gov/about.htm>.
5. Submitting unidentified decedent cases to NCIC is not mandated by law. For more information, see Federal Bureau of Investigation, *NCIC Missing Person and Unidentified Person Statistics for 2008*.
6. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, as of 2004, more than half (51 percent) of the nation's medical examiners' offices had no policy for retaining records — such as X-rays, DNA or fingerprints — on unidentified human decedents. However, BJS also noted that more than 90 percent of the offices servicing large jurisdictions did have such a policy. Hickman, M.J., K.A. Hughes, K.J. Strom, and J.D. Roper-Miller, *Medical Examiners and Coroners' Offices, 2004*.