

NamUs Helps Identify the Missing

Toussaint Gumbs, 16, of Richmond, Va., missing for 14 years. Sonia Lente, 44, of Albuquerque, N.M., missing for six years. Michael Francis, 21, of Baltimore, missing for two years. Jody King, 28, of Ticonderoga, N.Y., missing for two months. Luis Fernandez, 22, of Omaha, Neb., missing for two years. A common thread unites these five people across geography and time: all of their families finally know what happened to their loved ones. They are among the first individuals whose remains were identified and whose missing person cases were closed due to the existence of the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs).

NamUs is an online clearinghouse for missing persons and unidentified decedent records. It not only serves as an investigative tool for law enforcement, it provides a vehicle for the general public to play a part in finding missing persons, according to Kristina Rose, acting director, National Institute of Justice (NIJ).

“Before, there wasn’t a whole lot they could do except sit back and wait,” Rose says. “Now families and friends of missing loved ones can be part of the process.”

NamUs was developed with funding from NIJ, which is highly involved in the oversight and management of NamUs. NamUs consists of two databases, one of Unidentified Persons/Remains and one of Missing Persons. Entries in the former come from medical examiners and coroners and include characteristics ranging from basic descriptors of sex and race to detailed descriptions of scars, tattoos and dental records. How much detail they can provide depends on the condition of the remains.

Anyone who registers to use the site can create an entry for the Missing Persons database and family members in particular are encouraged to include each and every detail they can recall, no matter how trivial. Law enforcement agencies are encouraged to enter their missing persons cases into the database as well. Certain information is restricted and is only available to law enforcement users.

Entries in the Missing Persons database are verified by NamUs staff before they are published, and once posted, the system immediately cross checks new entries

against the other database and posts alerts about possible matches to the case manager. Users can also manually search the database for potential matches. (See “National Missing and Unidentified Persons System,” in *TechBeat* Winter 2008, for background on system development.)

The Bureau of Justice Statistics has estimated that, in a typical year, medical examiners and coroners handle approximately 4,400 unidentified human decedent cases, 1,000 of which remain unidentified after one year. As of 2004, more than half of the nation’s medical examiners’ offices had no policy for retaining records of unidentified human remains, including x-rays, DNA or fingerprints. This makes comparison of records across jurisdictions very difficult. (*Medical Examiners and Coroners’ Offices, 2004*, <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=782>).

“Before NamUs, several local and state agencies had Web sites similar in concept to NamUs in place, most notably Clark County in Nevada and Fulton County in Georgia,” says NamUs coordinator Billy Young. “They put out information about their unidentified decedents and it was successful. NamUs takes this to a national level. People travel all over the country and this way the whole country is helping you search. We see missing persons highlighted on television and on the walls in grocery and discount stores. In this day and age, almost everybody uses the Internet. If people read about a missing person on the Internet, then there are more eyes looking for that person. You can’t have too many people looking . . . someone has to have seen that person.”

Clark County Coroner Michael Murphy welcomes the opportunity that NamUs provides for nationwide search capability and he hopes the effort may someday expand to the international level.

“The real key is that this provides an opportunity for the different disciplines involved in missing persons cases, especially for families, to be involved,” Murphy says. “This is monumentally important to these families. When we talk to families, one of their greatest concerns

DISTINGUISHING NAMUS AND THE NCIC DATABASE

The National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database includes documented criminal justice information and may be accessed only by law enforcement professionals. NamUs, on the other hand, can be accessed by state and local agencies (such as county medical examiners) who may not be law enforcement professionals, and by the public in general. It thus expands the pool of individuals providing information on missing persons cases and facilitates research that may aid law enforcement agencies in their investigations. NamUs can and does request information exchanges with NCIC; a law enforcement agency can choose to ask for such a data exchange rather than entering cases a second time into NamUs.

Some of the benefits that law enforcement officers can realize from using NamUs include:

- Restriction of sensitive case information.
- Transmission of dental records and radiographs via e-mail to permit immediate comparisons by expert odontologists.
- Printing of comprehensive case reports from the system.
- Utilization of extensive search capabilities. Investigators can modify search parameters to broaden or narrow searches based on case-specific information such as date last seen, demographics, dental information and distinct body features.
- Access to subject-matter experts such as anthropologists, odontologists, fingerprint experts and DNA analysts at no cost.
- Automation of searches of missing persons records against unidentified persons records, providing side-by-side comparisons. Cases with similarities are automatically presented to the investigator, allowing performance of exclusions (with justification).

is that they feel they are set aside. This lets them be involved in the resolution of their own pain and anguish.”

Murphy says that when Clark County began its project, the initial reaction in the local press seemed “less than favorable” and included interviews with other area coroners and medical examiners who opposed the approach.

“We started picking up the phone and talking to families and asking if we were doing the right thing and everyone’s response was yes you are, thank you,” Murphy says. “One of the things a family member said really stuck with me: anyone who has had a loved one go missing is searching everywhere, every day. Sometimes someone looks like the missing person from the back, or from a distance, and it turns out to be someone else. Families go through this all the time, sometimes multiple times in the same day. While the answers we provide them with are not happy ones, having the answer means so much. Through NamUs, we can help them have some resolution.”

Both Murphy and Young emphasized that the key to NamUs’ continued success is making law enforcement and the public aware of what the system can do.

As Murphy puts it, “The more we can get people to be aware, the more entries they will put into the system, and the higher the probability of solving more cases. That’s what it’s all about. It isn’t about anybody getting credit. I have a friend who says if everyone would stop worrying about credit, more would get done. That’s what happened with NamUs, people in the community just rolled up their sleeves and this is the result.”

For more information or to use NamUs, visit <http://www.namus.gov/>. In May 2009, the International Association of Chiefs of Police recognized NamUs with an Excellence in Technology Award for superior achievement and innovation in the field of law enforcement communication and information technology.



This article was reprinted from the Spring 2010 edition of *TechBeat*, the award-winning quarterly newsmagazine of the National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center System, a program of the National Institute of Justice under Cooperative Agreement #2009-MU-MU-K261, awarded by the U.S. Department of Justice.

Analyses of test results do not represent product approval or endorsement by the National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice; the National Institute of Standards and Technology, U.S. Department of Commerce; or Lockheed Martin. Points of view or opinions contained within this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

The National Institute of Justice is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance; the Bureau of Justice Statistics; the Community Capacity Development Office; the Office for Victims of Crime; the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention; and the Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking (SMART).

HELP FROM FAMILIES AND FROM STRANGERS

Jody King. On April 20, 2009, Connecticut State Police responded to the scene of a single-car accident on Interstate 91 near Enfield; first responders on the scene found a vehicle but not the driver, Jody King of Ticonderoga, N.Y. A passenger in the vehicle said King appeared to be disoriented after the accident and had gone toward nearby woods. Personal effects, including King's identification, were found nearby.

On June 18, a body, too badly decomposed to be identified visually, was found in a drainage pipe on the grounds of MassMutual Insurance Co. in Enfield, near the scene of the accident. Because King's wife and an aunt had entered extensive information — including dental information and details about his wedding ring — into NamUs, a medical examiner positively identified the body the next day.

"That's the power of having this information out there for people to use and see," says NamUs coordinator Billy Young. "If his family had not been so diligent in posting the records, the body might have remained unidentified. A lot of the better case records come from families working together with law enforcement. If the family can tell you what dentist to contact for records, it can save a lot of time. A description of a tattoo could provide the key; for medical examiners tattoos are huge. Just knowing there is a tattoo rules out all the unidentified persons who don't have one. In King's case, the family provided information about the wedding ring that only they would know."

For more information about the Jody King case, visit <http://www.wfsb.com/news/19802388/detail.html>.

Sonia Lente. While the time during which King's relatives did not know his fate was relatively short, Sonia Lente had been missing from Albuquerque for more than six years when a civilian "cybersleuth" used NamUs to make a connection between Lente and a body found two years after her 2002 disappearance. Investigators

had thought the body might be Lente's upon its discovery, but could not positively identify the remains. At the time the cybersleuth called their attention to the case, a statewide call for missing women's dental records in connection with another case had yielded Lente's dental X-rays. A positive identification was made and Lente's family notified.

"There's a lot of people who do this for a hobby, who look for missing persons and try to identify them," Young says. "This case illustrates how NamUs can help them be successful. Thanks to the public's being able to use this site, there are families who have closure."

For more information about the Sonia Lente case, visit <http://www.koat.com/news/19796429/detail.html>

Toussaint Gumbs and Michael Francis. The body of Toussaint Gumbs, one of the first people identified through the use of NamUs in June 2009, had actually been found in Richmond at about the time relatives reported his disappearance, but it took 14 years and the assistance of another civilian volunteer to make the connection. A positive identification of Michael Francis followed Gumbs' by just a few days.

For more details about Gumbs and Francis, see <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/07/20/AR2009072003540.html>, http://www2.timesdispatch.com/rtd/news/local/crime/article/MISS03_20091002-222207/297097/, and <http://www.helpfindthemissing.org/forum/showthread.php?t=14931>.

Luis Fernandez. Officer Jim Shields of the Omaha (Neb.) Police Department learned about NamUs at a conference held at the University of North Texas Center for Human Identification and entered the Luis Fernandez case immediately upon his return in March 2009. A civilian located a possible match with remains found in Iowa just one month later, but it required first an inconclusive search with dental records and finally a DNA test to confirm Fernandez' identity on Jan. 11, 2010.

The National Law Enforcement and
Corrections Technology Center System
Your Technology Partner
www.justnet.org
800-248-2742