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Legislators Look At Smolinski Case

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"A troubling case...."

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Missing adults: a difference in attitude
By Amanda Falcone
Meriden Record Journal

CHESHIRE - Using a paper map, they began searching for their son more than two years ago.

Today, they are still looking for William P. Smolinski Jr., but with the help of the FBI.

William Smolinski Jr. has been missing since Aug. 24, 2004. He was 31 at the time. Several photos of him are plastered on posters that offer a \$15,000 reward for his return or the recovery of his body. His parents buy the posters in bulk, but say they often get torn down.

His picture and story have also appeared on CBS' "Without a Trace" and on Fox's "America's Most Wanted."

But still, his parents, William and Janice Smolinski, of Cheshire, have no clue as to their son's whereabouts.

"We need answers," Janice Smolinski said in an interview last week.

William Smolinski Jr.'s parents say he was never in trouble with the law and comes from a close and loving family.

"I think we are a perfect example of how the system could go wrong," Janice Smolinski said.

The Waterbury Police Department conducted the initial search for William Smolinski Jr., and the Smolinski family said it was a frustrating experience. Police took mouth swabs from Janice Smolinski and her daughter, Paula Bell, but misplaced the DNA samples, Janice Smolinski said. Police were not aware of resources such as the FBI's Combined DNA Index System, an exchange of electronic DNA samples that can be accessed by federal, state and local crime labs, she said.

"I'm not picking on the Waterbury Police Department," Janice Smolinski said.

"I think it's a national problem."

[Lt.] Christopher Corbett, a Waterbury police spokesman, said it would be inappropriate to comment on the investigation Monday. The FBI also declined to comment.

Police do not receive enough training about missing persons, and there is also not enough communication between the police and a state medical examiner, Janice Smolinski said, adding that she hopes that will change in Connecticut this year.

In Connecticut, all state police officers receive four hours of training on how to handle missing person investigations, but there is no requirement for local police departments to follow state policy, and there is also no uniform policy that local police must follow. State law does not address missing adults.

Legislation proposed by state Reps. Vickie O. Nardello, D-Prospect, and Stephen D. Dargan, D-West Haven, would establish protocol involving missing persons for state and local police, require police to receive more training on how to handle missing persons and demand more contact between the state medical examiner and police departments.

The bill, which is being considered by the General Assembly's Public Safety and Security Committee, would also make the removal or defacing of wanted or missing person posters a misdemeanor.

"The statutes are lacking in this area," Nardello said.

Dargan, co-chairman of the Public Safety and Security Committee, could not be reached for comment Monday, but several members of the state committee said they were supportive of such a bill last week.

"This is a deeply troubling issue," said Rep. Steven T. Mikutel, D-Griswold. Nardello was prompted to submit a proposal on missing persons because of a meeting with Janice Smolinski, she said. She received a phone call and agreed to meet at the Smolinskis' home for tea, she said.

"It started out as a conversation between a legislator and a constituent, but it quickly became a conversation mother to mother," Nardello said.

And Nardello is not the only legislator Janice Smolinski has addressed. She testified at a Public Safety and Security Committee hearing last week.

"Police are quick to respond to the report of a missing child, but there are hundreds of cases of missing adults that are not handled with proper seriousness," she said. "When it comes to a missing adult, it just seems like it's treated differently."

Janice Smolinski said she knows there is a difference just by hearing people's comments.

"He's an adult," she said people told her. "He'll be back."

Age should not matter, Nardello said.

"The fact is that they are missing," she said.

Jessica Norton, a victim advocate for Survivors of Homicide, also said missing children are often handled differently by the media. When children are missing, she said they often receive attention because they have been murdered or kidnapped. While her nonprofit organization helps people cope with the murder of a loved one, it also reaches out to those who have missing family members. William and Janice Smolinski belong to the group, which meets monthly in Southington.

Being a part of Survivors of Homicide is one of several ways the Smolinski family is dealing with their frustrations, anger and grief. William and Janice Smolinski also attend the Community United Effort Center for Missing Persons' national conferences and correspond regularly with people throughout the country who have missing children or adults.

"We like to be with the people who are dealing with the same thing," William Smolinski said.

"We are trying to deal with everything in a positive way," Janice Smolinski added. "If you didn't, you'd probably go into a deep depression."

Janice Smolinski said she spends hours on the computer researching the latest investigative techniques, and she is working with people across the country to advocate for more federal funding for the FBI's DNA database and for the National Center for Missing Adults.

"She's really done her homework," William Smolinski said. "She surprises me."

Backlog for data to be entered into the FBI's DNA database is not due to insufficient funding, FBI Special Agent Ann Todd said. Any backlog is due to the number of cases submitted and the laboratory processing the samples, she said.

Advocacy has helped keep William and Janice Smolinski's minds busy. They are trying to make sure that other parents do not have the same experiences that they have had, they said.

"Each step is a step forward," Janice Smolinski said. William Smolinski Jr.'s birthday was last month, but his parents could not celebrate with him.

Instead, they hung up more signs, which they said were torn down. They have decorated bulletin boards, combed the Naugatuck River Valley and have learned quickly about state laws and forensics.

But there is still no trace of William Smolinski Jr.

"The FBI has Billy's case now, and I have to leave it to them," Janice Smolinski said. please click here for Billy's website: <http://www.justice4billy.com/>

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