

# courant.com

---

<http://www.courant.com/news/local/hc-apmissing0326.artmar26,0,2152526.story?page=2&coll=hc-headlines-home>

## **Making Missing Adults Matter**

### **National Effort Seeks More Consistent Laws For Handling Cases Involving Older Individuals**

By SUSAN HAIGH  
Associated Press

March 26 2007

When Janice Smolinski's 31-year-old son, Billy, disappeared in 2004, there were no Amber Alerts, no urgent police investigations.

Police made the family wait three days to report the Waterbury man's disappearance because a neighbor believed he had left town voluntarily. Family members had to organize their own search parties and pressure police to fingerprint Billy's truck, his mother said.

When authorities did take the case, they lost or misplaced the family's DNA samples - including Billy's razor shavings - three times, Smolinski said.

Two-and-a-half years later, Billy Smolinski is nowhere to be found, and his mother has joined a national grass-roots effort to lobby for more consistent laws for handling missing adult cases.

The group's Campaign for the Missing is lobbying this year in Connecticut, New Jersey, Florida, Oregon, New York, Missouri, Ohio and Indiana.

"Our system isn't working," Janice Smolinski said. "Unfortunately, when adults go missing, they don't really take it seriously."

Of more than 109,000 active records in the National Crime Information Center's missing person file as of Dec. 31, 2005, just under half involve adults.

But the National Center for Missing Adults, which handled more than 23,000 reports and helped nearly 25,000 family members in 2005, announced last year that federal budget cuts had forced it to close its Phoenix offices and attempt to relocate to a less expensive space.

Funding was cut to \$148,000 last year for the center, which also helped families during Hurricane Katrina.

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, in comparison, typically receives more than \$35 million a year from the federal government.

Police say they don't have the resources to focus attention on every case, and adults are allowed to disappear voluntarily.

"It's a free country and we've got to remember that," said West Hartford Police Chief James Strillacci, legislative chairman for the Connecticut Police Chiefs Association. "We have wanderlust in our blood and people get up and move once in a while."

Contrary to television crime shows, he said, the FBI rarely assists in missing adult cases.

"We cannot do for everybody that they would like us to do," he said. "We can only do what the law and our budgets allow."

The bills proposed by Campaign for the Missing touch on everything from banning cremation of unidentified remains to informing families about the clearinghouses for missing adults and children.

Each would prevent police from refusing to accept missing persons reports in most circumstances. They spell out data police must collect for a missing person, from eye color to blood type. They also would allow police to flag a missing person - such as someone with medical problems - as high risk, triggering more immediate action.

The families of missing adults also want police to enter all collected information, including DNA profiles, into applicable federal databases and to provide timely case updates to family members.

They also want more publicity for missing adults.

The Amber Alert program, named for a 9-year-old girl who was kidnapped and killed, allows law enforcement and television and radio broadcasters to activate an urgent bulletin in the most serious child abduction cases.

But for adults, attention focuses largely on the bizarre or unusual, such as runaway bride Jennifer Wilbanks, who fled days before her planned 2005 wedding and made up a story about being kidnapped and sexually assaulted to cover the fact that she got cold feet and went to New Mexico.

When Drew Kesse's 24-year-old daughter, Jennifer, didn't show up for work in Orlando, Fla., on Jan. 24, 2006, a police officer suggested the attractive blond financial analyst had gotten into a fight with her boyfriend and would return soon. More than a year has passed with no sign of her.

To drum up attention, the families of the missing have become amateur public relations consultants, creating websites and organizing public events.

Kesse has flown banners over football games and printed playing cards with Jennifer's picture. Well-wishers have paid for eight billboards and posters in 24 bus shelters.

Kelly Jolkowski, whose Nebraska-based Project Jason created the Campaign for the Missing, has organized charity bike rides and appearances on the Montel Williams Show to generate interest in missing people, including her 19-year-old son, Jason, who vanished from the family's Omaha driveway in 2001.

"The only thing you can do is get the story out there," she said. "One of these days you're going to hit the right person."

Though Omaha police did a complete investigation of her son's disappearance, Jolkowski said that's not the norm.

"When you have somebody disappear as an adult rather than a minor, it's an entirely different situation," she said. "There's no federal law that mandates them. Unless the state has passed this legislation, they are not mandated to do anything. They don't even have to take the case, period."

Jolkowski said families have told her of local police not aware of the federal DNA database. She has learned of unidentified bodies cremated or buried in unmarked graves without any DNA samples taken.

"It was a chore to get the police to take Molly's case seriously because she was 23," said Keri Dattilo, referring to her cousin, Molly Dattilo, who disappeared July 6, 2004, in Indianapolis.

Keri Dattilo said it took six weeks before an investigation began in earnest.

"They could have tracked down more people in the very beginning with a fresh memory," she said. "I think they need to start taking these cases seriously in the beginning. They need to listen to the families."

New Jersey resident Jim Viola's wife, Patricia, disappeared six years ago, the day before Valentine's Day. He has since learned by trial and error what should be done when someone disappears.

He didn't know for more than three years that a DNA profile of his wife could be created with a blood sample from his mother-in-law.

By pushing Campaign for the Missing legislation in his state, he hopes to save others from some of the heartache he has suffered.

"I'm basically trying to get New Jersey residents to write to their senator, to get them to understand that this law is for them," he said.

*Copyright 2007 Associated Press*

---