

Still searching for a sign of their son

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CHESHIRE - Adults who go missing do not just walk off and disappear without a trace. The majority turn out to be homicide victims, according to William Smolinski Sr., whose son , William Jr., has been missing since August 2004.

Smolinski and his wife, Janice, said their son , who was 31 at the time of his disappearance, was family-orientated and in regular contact with them and the rest of the family, which includes his sister Paula, aunts, uncles and cousins all living nearby and within the state. His mother said her son wasn't troubled or the type of person to just take off without telling anyone.

"I think there was some foul play," William Smolinski Sr. said. After more than 2½ years of searching without any tangible leads, the Smolinskis are hoping a billboard with information about their son 's disappearance along Route 8 south in Waterbury will help jog peoples' memories. The billboard is within a mile and a half of where Billy was living at the time of his disappearance.

"Well, someone knows something and if they have to drive by it, maybe their conscience will get to them," said Janice Smolinski.

The billboard, which went up on March 28, was actually a surprise to the Smolinskis. Janice's brother and sister-in-law arranged to have the billboard made and paid for it with some help from the Kristen Foundation, a North Carolina-based nonprofit organization that helps the families of missing and endangered adults.

The cost of a billboard varies by road, with rates based on the amount of traffic. A typical billboard along Route 8 is about \$5,000 for the first month. Given the special circumstances, the billboard for Billy Smolinski cost \$2,500 to make and put up for the first month. The cost to keep the sign up will be about \$700 each month after, something the Smolinskis are planning on doing for as long as they can financially.

They haven't had much time to think about fundraising for the search effort and instead have been busy learning and trying to educate the public about the lack of training and funding for missing adults. Last weekend, they attended a New York Missing Persons Day in Albany and the week before that, a conference on missing adults in Wilmington, N.C.

Janice Smolinski puts in time equivalent to a full-time job contacting law enforcement and crime lab officials. William Smolinski Sr. says his wife is on the computer and phone daily, sometimes as early as 4:30 a.m., trying to get answers.

"Missing children get a lot," said Janice Smolinski. "They have the Amber Alert, the National Center for Missing Children and they have a lot of funds."

What she has learned about missing adults is disturbing. She said that in 2007, there isn't even a central list of missing persons in Connecticut. While there is a National Center for Missing Adults, Janice Smolinski said that since Hurricane Katrina, federal funding has been diverted away from the center.

In Connecticut, state police officers only receive about four hours of training on how to conduct a missing person investigation and there is no state agency tasked exclusively with searching for missing adults. Though local police departments handle most missing adult cases, they are not required to follow state police procedures and there is no uniform procedure in place for all local departments.

In fact, when Janice Smolinski went to provide a DNA sample to the Waterbury police for her son 's case, she ended up telling officers about resources like the FBI's Combined DNA Index system, an electronic database of DNA samples, which can be accessed by local, state and federal crime labs. The officers weren't familiar with it.

"It's broken. The communication isn't there between the different agencies," she said.

To help combat some of these problems, the Smolinskis testified before the Judiciary Committee in Hartford last week in support of a state bill that would provide more missing persons case training for state and local police. Co-sponsored by five state representatives, including Vickie O. Nardello, D-Prospect, and Alfred C. Adinolfi, R-Cheshire, House Bill 5273, "An Act

Concerning Law Enforcement and Missing Persons" would "improve the ability of law enforcement agencies to locate and return missing persons, improve the identification of human remains and improve timely information and notification to the family members of missing persons."

Nine people testified in support along with the Smolinskis including Dr. Wayne Carver, chief medical examiner for Connecticut, a former New York Police Department officer, a former chief of police from New Jersey and a former police officer turned private investigator from Waterbury.

Connecticut-based forensics expert Dr. Henry Lee, who could not attend the hearing, sent a letter of support for the bill.

State Sen. Thomas P. Gaffey, D-Meriden, is co-sponsor of a similar bill in the Senate, An Act Concerning Missing Persons and the Duties of the Chief Medical Examiner, which addresses a more timely identification of human remains and better communication with family members.

Janice Smolinski, who said the hearing went well, believes that both bills will be combined. In the meantime, she and her husband will be working with other families of missing persons across the country to try and get similar bills passed in all states, which would be an improvement since they started their search for Billy in 2004.

"We thought it was the Waterbury police, but it's not," said William Smolinski Sr. of the problems families deal with. "It's national."