

New tools help in the search for missing persons

BY BRYNN MANDEL REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

The craters dug by authorities at a Seymour farm this month heightened Janice and Bill Smolinski's hopes that, after four tortured years, they might at least bring the body of their missing son home.

In Cheshire, 18 miles north of the digging prompted by a new investigative lead, unbridled smiles alternated with hand-wringing while they waited. Then came crushing news: days spent churning up dirt yielded no answers in their then-31-year-old Waterbury son's disappearance. Still, the family presses on, hoping that they may yet bring Billy Smolinski Jr. home, if only to bury him.

Their hope hangs, in part, on two relatively new tools available to law enforcement for matching unidentified bodies with missing people nationwide. Previously used primarily for forensic crime solving, a database called CODIS is increasingly being used to match DNA from human remains with that of missing people, or their family members.

A second new tool, called NamUs, posts pictures of the unidentified dead and information online. It will be linked to a missing persons database next year.

Pioneers who have had success solving cases with these tools say they remain grossly underused. They especially fret over languishing cases in which, for lack of an established identity, homicides are going unsolved. In many cases, police departments' and coroners' awareness has simply not caught up with the technology.

Hoping for a hit

Janice Smolinski believes so strongly in these new systems' ability to solve heartbreaking cases like her son's, she lectures about them to anyone who will listen. The DNA missing persons database launched in 2000 and expanded nationally in 2005, the same year Smolinski started trying to get her genetic markers uploaded in hopes of a hit. It took several queries to different law enforcement agencies, she said. Smolinski will share her experiences as homemaker-turned-advocate today at a 2 p.m. Missing Persons Day rally on the Waterbury Green. Next week, she will stress to law enforcement officers at a Baltimore forensic training conference how greater use of these new systems could help families like hers.

The more these databases are used and filled with information, the greater potential for matches — giving names to bodies and closure to families.

The FBI counted more than 105,000 active missing-person cases last year. Connecticut police, on average, take about 7,000 missing person reports, but that includes quickly resolved cases. Nationally, experts estimate 40,000 sets of remains sit unidentified. Some of those unnamed bodies belong to the missing.

In Connecticut, state police started using CODIS for missing person and unidentified body cases a year ago. In some cases, DNA from human remains was already being submitted. Lt. J. Paul Vance called law enforcement's use of these tools "in its

infantile stages," adding that the uploading of case information is ongoing.

Waterbury's Jane Doe

NamUs lists three Connecticut cases so far. One was the skeleton of a woman found five years ago slouched against the wall inside a garage off Waterbury's East Farm Road. City police say she is the only Jane or John Doe in recent memory. Children cleaning the garage found the woman face-up, white zippered sweater and white MUDD brand jeans hanging from her 5-foot-2-inch frame. Her flesh was long gone, but her hair remained neatly secured in a bun by a small yellow pencil. Nearby, police found a crack pipe and syringe.

"In this case, I don't think there is anything left" to do investigatively, said city police Lt. Christopher Corbett. Except that authorities still have no clue who she is.

Waterbury police policy now dictates that families reporting someone missing be offered the opportunity to submit a DNA sample to CODIS as soon as preliminary investigative efforts show the case is more than a short-term runaway. Corbett echoed sentiments that DNA remains underused in missing person and Jane Doe cases, but added that "it's the next logical step for DNA (use) for police departments."

One way the CODIS system complements investigations, experts say, is that while traditional detective work may exhaust all leads in a case like Waterbury's Jane Doe, the computer database keeps it active. The system searches for matches about once a month, as more DNA samples are added. Should some family member who misses this Waterbury Jane Doe decide to voluntarily submit their DNA as a tool, it could solve the case at nominal cost with a simple mouth swab and subsequent click of a few computer buttons.

In one Nevada jurisdiction, these new tools helped identify 31 of 167 nameless dead in cases dating to the 1960s. Concerned his office was not doing all it could with modern technology to resolve these doggedly cold cases, Coroner P. Michael Murphy of Clark County resolved to find out who these bodies belonged to.

To some controversy, Murphy posted pictures of the dead on a Web site for the public to peruse. Along with DNA matching, it helped solve 31 of these perplexing cases in five years. The new, National Institute of Justice NamUs database is built on Murphy's successes and similar efforts. A self-described optimist who believes in "right always winning," Murphy underscored the humanity driving his actions.

"We are not talking about numbers," he said last week from Las Vegas. "When someone's dead it's easy to forget them. Just because we don't know who they are doesn't mean they don't deserve to be brought back to loved ones."

Families can't forget

Earlier this month, a pink polka dot fabric swath arrived in Janice Smolinski's mailbox. A lace doily and heart-shaped buttons decorated the fabric, surrounding photographs of a young pigtailed girl and her mother. "What happened to Grace and Little Gracie?" the square read.

Grace and Gracie Reapp disappeared 34 years ago from Jerico, Vt. A few weeks ago,

Grace Reapp's sister sent the handcrafted swath to Smolinski, who is assembling fabric squares from across the country into a "quilt of hope."

The Las Vegas-area coroner and George Adams, Missing Persons Program coordinator at the University of North Texas' DNA Identity Laboratory, posit that families like the Smolinskis will advance use on this new frontier. The Texas lab, which has helped identify 188 people in four years, serves as one of three CODIS clearinghouses. Families are most motivated to solve these mysteries; they will take the time to painstakingly pore over online information, looking for a familiar tattoo or missing tooth on an unnamed dead person. The DNA database's success hinges in strong measure on families' participation.

The American Civil Liberties Union has expressed concern about the government's collection of DNA.

The ranks of Connecticut's unidentified dead pale in comparison to other states, according to Edward McDonough, deputy chief medical examiner. He recalled "really only a handful" of mostly skeletal remains lacking identification.

"Fortunately it's not a big issue here in Connecticut with regard to the numbers," he said, adding: "Obviously each individual is important."

Last year, three sets of women's bones turned up behind a New Britain shopping plaza. Thirteen years earlier, police found the body of a fourth woman suffering from a gunshot wound sheathed in plastic and a sleeping bag at the same location. As of this week, no identifications had been announced.

DNA match confirmed

In 2006, the University of North Texas DNA database ferreted out the fate of 16-year-old Washington state runaway Marci Bachmann. It turned out, Bachmann ran into a serial killer's cross hairs in 1984. For two decades, Bachmann was known to authorities as "Debbie Deer Creek," for the area of Missoula, Mont., where her bullet riddled body was dumped by Wayne Nance. As Bachmann's body sat anonymously in a morgue, her family contacted police investigating other killings in Bachmann's home state. Around the time detectives sent Debbie Deer Creek's femur for DNA testing, police investigating unrelated Washington cases took DNA from Bachmann's mom. A potential match between Bachmann's mother and Debbie Deer Creek was confirmed with DNA from other family members.

It frustrates Adams that DNA samples are not rolling into the database at his university's laboratory by the thousands. He estimated fewer than 15 percent of the unidentified dead and missing are in the system.

"Why not do everything possible to give these cases the best resolution?" he said, citing the unsolved homicides. "Every day, every minute that's wasted puts other lives at risk."

Murphy referred to one case in Nevada that he expected could result in an arrest.

"Somebody is saying, 'I got away with murder,'" he said. "Guess what? There's going to pieces of the puzzle are now there, we just have to assemble them."

