



Missing woman's kin inspire bill

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SPECIAL TO THE RECORD



BOGOTA -- More than five years after a 42-year-old borough woman went missing, her husband has joined forces with state and local officials to propose legislation geared toward improving how New Jersey agencies handle missing persons cases.

State Sen. Loretta Weinberg, D-Teaneck, stood on the front lawn of Jim Viola's home recently to rally support for "Patricia's Law," legislation named for his wife that would enhance the system of notifying families of missing persons and work to improve procedures for identifying human remains that may help solve such cases.

"It [the legislation] really sets up a lot more criteria when a person goes missing," Jim Viola said of the measure Weinberg introduced in the Legislature last week. "This law is going to give a lot of hope to families of the missing."

Under the proposed legislation, law enforcement agencies must accept without delay any report of a missing person and cannot refuse to accept such reports, a provision designed to prevent individuals from being turned away when initially making such claims.

The law would also require authorities to make the person filing a missing-persons report aware of two clearinghouses for such information -- the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and the National Center for Missing Adults.

Another component of the legislation requires medical examiners to work with the state police to speedily identify recovered bodies or body parts.

New Jersey adds to the growing list of states embracing such legislation.



Colorado, Wyoming and the District of Columbia have already passed laws bolstering procedures surrounding missing persons cases, and more than 25 states are considering similar measures,

By the numbers

Missing persons reported in New Jersey:

2000: 19,955
2001: 20,223
2002: 19,354
2003: 19,591
2004: 18,893
2005: 18,620
2006 (as of September): 13,208

said Kelly Jolkowski, founder and president of ProjectJason.org, a non-profit missing persons organization.

Weinberg said she was hopeful the Legislature would adopt the bill before year's end.

"Maybe we will have the governor come back to this lawn to actually sign the bill," she said.

Approximately 130,000 persons have been reported missing in New Jersey since 2000, according to the state police's Missing Persons Unit.

About 1,700 of those cases remain unsolved, including Patricia Viola's. The homemaker, an epileptic, has not been seen since Feb. 13, 2001. She did not have her medication with her, according to authorities.

Jim Viola, an engineer for Honeywell in Teterboro, has not lost hope that her case will be solved. The family is offering a \$10,000 reward for information that leads to Patricia Viola's whereabouts.

"What's kept me so focused is that this is my wife and I have two kids," he said. "I'm determined to find my wife and their mother. There's no way I'm going to let her fade away."

Viola still keeps a Valentine's Day gift bag that he bought before his wife's disappearance underneath the living room mantle.

He hopes to one day give his wife the bag, which is filled with candy and cards from various holidays and birthdays she's missed.

And Viola continues passing out 3-inch buttons with his wife's picture whenever he can.

"I wear my button all the time," he said, standing in front of a table filled with pictures from their wedding, honeymoon and family vacations. "It's my way of saying I'm not giving up."

The couple's two children, Christine, 19, and Michael, 15, who were 13 and 10 when their mother disappeared, have learned to cherish even the most mundane memories, such as going shopping and taking walks around their neighborhood.

"It's hard not having her here, because I was so close to her," said Christine Viola, now herself a mother of a 3-month-old son, Amari. "Even though it's been almost six years, I don't think people should give up hope."

- Number of active unsolved missing persons cases (since 2,000): 1,691
- 75 percent to 80 percent of reported missing persons are juveniles

Source: New Jersey State Police Missing Persons Unit

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