



Everything Jersey

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Police use DNA data for missing persons

New Jersey takes lead in collecting samples for new nationwide identification project

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On any given day in New Jersey, there are about 1,500 people who have been missing for more than a month. There are currently 272 bodies that have never been identified, in some cases years after the remains were first discovered.

In many cases, the police have exhausted any leads they had, leaving family members to face the grim possibility that their loved one may be gone forever.

The State Police's missing persons unit hopes to change that prospect by entering the DNA of the missing person or a close family member into a new national database being built in Texas, Lt. Col. Gayle Cameron said yesterday.

"We're going to solve some cases, but we're also going to be letting families know we're not forgetting about their loved ones," said Cameron, the deputy superintendent of investigations. "We're not forgetting about them."

New Jersey is the first state in the country to develop a comprehensive plan for collecting DNA evidence so it can be entered into a database being operated with federal funding by the University of North Texas Center for Human Identification, Cameron said.

As part of the nationwide project, known as the President's DNA Initiative, the State Police's missing persons unit began three months ago to contact every county prosecutor in New Jersey with a list of missing persons in the jurisdiction.

The police also provided prosecutors with kits that local police departments can use to collect DNA samples from the missing person's personal items, such as clothing, toothbrushes or hairbrushes, or from relatives. The State Police have also begun training those officers on how to properly collect the samples.

The state medical examiner, meanwhile, is beginning to collect DNA evidence from the state's 272 unidentified bodies, Cameron said. In many of those cases, the medical examiner's office will have to locate and exhume the body to retrieve a sample that can be used for identification.

Those kits will then be sent to the university, where they will be analyzed and entered into the national missing persons database, which is part of the Combined DNA Index System, or CODIS. Cameron, however, emphasized that no samples will be entered into the criminal side of CODIS to ensure that family members will be willing to participate.

Cameron said she was hopeful other states would follow the State Police's lead and begin to collect samples to be entered into the database.

"We have already been contacted by some states and we are encouraging the other states to do this," she said. "Let's face it, if the other states don't do the same the database, it won't be very effective."

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