



More Than Just DNA

Recent advances in DNA technology and the development of searchable Federal, State, and local criminal DNA databases that can link DNA profiles from crime scenes to convicted offenders and arrestees, as well as to other crime scenes, are major contributors to the success of cold case units. Another contributor is the development of missing persons databases that contain DNA profiles of unidentified remains and of relatives of these missing persons.

These advances in technology have encouraged many law enforcement agencies across the country to reevaluate their cold cases for possible DNA evidence. Although DNA plays a major role in many cold case investigations, it is not the only tool that cold case units use to work unsolved case investigations.

The duties of cold case squads vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction and can include locating and working with witnesses, reviewing physical evidence, even performing an outreach and networking role. Law enforcement agencies not only need to capitalize on technological advances, they also need to devise a proper team approach, according to Charles Heurich, program manager in the National Institute of Justice's (NIJ's) Investigative and Forensic Sciences Division. This team approach, Heurich says, involves first prioritizing and investigating cold cases, then locating and analyzing biological and other evidence associated with them.

In addition, by taking advantage of free cold case training offered by NIJ, Heurich says that agencies can learn how to leverage all available tools and resources and bring the majority of cold case investigations to a successful conclusion.

"NIJ's cold case training program received its initial funding from the President's DNA Initiative in 2004. Originally, funds were only to be disbursed through an annual solicitation process and were to be used to help law enforcement agencies establish cold case units, with an aim at identifying, reviewing, and prioritizing violent crime cold cases that had the potential to be solved

using DNA analysis," he says. "Funding received through these solicitations could be used for specific investigative purposes, including support of new or existing cold case units or the operation of regional task forces."

Heurich adds, however, that it quickly became apparent that law enforcement agencies also needed help to find the right tools to successfully investigate their cases.

"It's a very different dynamic than investigating other types of cases," he says. "With that in mind, NIJ, an agency of the Office of Justice Programs, established a focus group consisting of cold case investigators and Federal agency representatives to help in the development of a training program.

"Our goal was not only to educate the agencies on how to do this from an investigative standpoint, but also to make them aware of tools that are available, including not only the forensic laboratory technology but also the FBI fingerprint and DNA databases and the National Integrated Ballistics Information Network ballistics and firearms database," Heurich says. "We wanted to give them access to the tools and techniques they needed."

Training programs have also included modules on preparing cases for prosecution, developing a media strategy/managing the media, sexual assault, how the crime laboratory fits in the process, and case management for missing children and child fatalities. Trainings have been offered at both basic and advanced levels, in addition to special trainings focusing on cases related to children.

"The trainings are actually more like symposiums in that participants often have been doing cold case investigations for years, and we are trying to give them tools that will help them do their jobs more effectively," Heurich says. "One very important point we try to convey is that in cold case investigation, you have to have a very strong triangle of cooperation consisting of the law enforcement agency, the crime lab, and the prosecutor's

office. If one leg in the triangle is weak, investigators will not be able to take the cases to prosecution and closure. The Denver Police Department, Crime Laboratory, and District Attorney's Office are a demonstrated example of that success and often present at the trainings," Heurich says.

Heurich explains that most large metropolitan jurisdictions already have cold case units, but NIJ also receives applications from medium-sized agencies that want to start a small unit of one or two detectives, or sometimes even a temporary task force to investigate a few cases. In some instances, he says, medium-sized jurisdictions have asked retired investigators or retired FBI agents living in their area to come back to work part-time to analyze cold case files. And for small and rural agencies, there are regional cooperatives such as the Mid-Atlantic Association of Cold Case Homicide Investigators (see www.coldcasehomicide.org/).

"I find that cold case units in general are more open to interagency cooperation," Heurich says. "On some level they relate to each other. When a person is struggling, there's no hesitation in contacting someone in a different agency for help."

The 2- to 3-day trainings offered by NIJ are open to approximately 100 investigators, 2 per agency (exceptions will be made for extremely large agencies). The trainings are currently held twice a year, once on the East Coast and once on the West Coast. NIJ funds transportation, lodging, and per diem for participants, and the training itself is no cost. Topics change from training to training based on feedback from investigators.

To obtain more information on upcoming trainings, go to www.dna.gov, or contact Charles Heurich, program manager for NIJ's Investigative and Forensic Sciences Division, 202-616-9264 or charles.heurich@usdoj.gov.

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