



A97 Forensic Anthropology and Identification at the State Level: Lessons From the Louisiana Repository for Unidentified and Missing Persons

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Learning Overview: The goal of this presentation is to demonstrate how the partnership between forensic anthropology, investigative agencies, and other forensic professionals in Louisiana has changed the way that unresolved unidentified and missing persons cases are investigated.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by posing a model for a state-level database for cold case unidentified and missing persons investigations.

In 2006, Louisiana passed an unprecedented law (LA RS 15:651-662) that established the Louisiana Repository for Unidentified and Missing Persons Information Program (the “Repository”) and outlined the role that forensic anthropology would play in the identification of missing persons across the state. By naming the Louisiana State University Forensic Anthropology and Computer Enhancement Services (LSU FACES) Laboratory the sole administrator of this database, the state legislature recognized that forensic anthropology could provide positive contributions in the collection of biological information from cold cases and was best suited to act as a liaison with other agencies involved in the investigations. After 13 years, the lessons learned from the Louisiana Repository highlight the problems facing efforts to identify the unidentified and find the missing all over the country.

The Repository is a secure, confidential database that contains biological, biographical, and investigative information about Louisiana unidentified and missing persons cases. The earliest versions of the database were a collection of WinID and Microsoft® Excel® and Access® files, which contained specific, but limited, information and was not cross-searchable. In 2015, all Repository files were transferred into a specifically designed, proprietary database program that is housed on a secure off-site server. This upgrade has resulted in more efficient data management by providing a straightforward means of searching for and comparing data. The LSU FACES Lab has maintained a website (identifyla.lsu.edu) that contains a public interface for global access to basic case information and images since 2008. This website has attracted almost two million page views since it was redesigned in 2010.

For criminal justice agencies in Louisiana, the Repository serves as a central location for archiving information about unidentified and missing persons, as well as provides a means for requesting assistance with other aspects of recent and cold case investigations. As a forensic anthropology laboratory, FACES personnel can provide all Repository cases with anthropological analyses (e.g., biological profile, trauma analysis, postmortem interval, etc.) and forensic imaging (e.g., facial approximation, age progression, etc.). Therefore, in addition to using the Repository to search case information from other agencies within the state, law enforcement also can have age progressions completed for long-term missing persons to provide updated images for public dissemination. For cases of unidentified decedents, coroners can request assistance in the collection of biological profile information, DNA sampling from bone and teeth, or dental imaging.

In its capacity as the administrator of the Repository, the LSU FACES Lab also cooperates with various state and national agencies to ensure that information on Louisiana’s cold case unidentified and missing persons is represented in appropriate national databases. Working closely with the Louisiana State Police Crime Laboratory (LSPCL), FACES submits decedent and family reference DNA samples for each Repository case; DNA results then are uploaded into and can be searched at the appropriate levels of the Combined DNA Index System (CODIS). Through a partnership with the Louisiana State University Police Department, FACES can search and input unidentified persons cases into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC). Finally, all Repository cases are entered into the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) to allow national access to searchable case information on Repository cases.

Since the creation of the Repository, the LSU FACES Lab has seen the successful resolution of 24 long-term unidentified and missing persons cases resulting from information collected for the database. These cases include four individuals missing 5–9 years, eight missing 10–19 years, six missing 20–29 years, and six missing for more than three decades. In 13 years, the Repository has transformed from a modest database to a robust warehouse of information. Due to the nature of these cases, data collection for the Repository is never complete. Through the continued partnership between forensic anthropologists, law enforcement officers, death investigators, and other forensic science professionals, the Repository will continue to adapt to the needs of the Louisiana unidentified and missing.

Forensic Anthropology, Unidentified Remains, Missing Persons