

Database can crack missing person cases -- if used

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In a photo made March 17, 2007, Janice Smolinski poses in her Cheshire, Conn., home where a photo of her son, Billy, is visible in the foreground. Billy disappeared from his Waterbury, Conn. home in Aug. 2004 and Smolinski believes a Justice Department database program will someday help find her son who was 31 when he vanished. (AP Photo/Michelle McLoughlin, File)

(AP) -- A new online database promises to crack some of the nation's 100,000 missing persons cases and provide answers to desperate families, but only a fraction of law enforcement agencies are using it.

The clearinghouse, dubbed NamUs (Name Us), offers a quick way to

check whether a missing loved one might be among the 40,000 sets of unidentified remains that languish at any given time with medical examiners across the country. NamUs is free, yet many law enforcement agencies still aren't aware of it, and others aren't convinced they should use their limited staff resources to participate.

Janice Smolinski hopes that changes - and soon. Her son, Billy, was 31 when he vanished five years ago. The Cheshire, Conn., woman fears he was murdered, his body hidden away.

She's now championing a bill in Congress, named "Billy's Law" after her son, that would set aside more funding and make other changes to encourage wider use of NamUs. Only about 1,100 of the nearly 17,000 law enforcement agencies nationwide are registered to use the system, even though it already has been hailed for solving 16 cases since it became fully operational last year.

"As these cases become more well known, as people learn about the successes of NamUs, more and more agencies are going to want to be part of it," said Kristina Rose, acting director of the National Institute of Justice at the Justice Department.

Before NamUs, families and investigators had to go through the slow process of checking with medical examiner's offices one by one. As the Smolinski family searched for clues to Billy's fate, they met a maze of federal, state and nonprofit missing person databases that weren't completely public and didn't share information well with each other.

NamUs, the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System, allows one-stop sleuthing for amateurs, families and police. Anyone can enter all the data they have on a missing person, including descriptions, photos, [fingerprints](#), dental records and DNA. Medical examiners can enter the same data on unidentified bodies, and anyone can search the

database for potential matches that warrant further investigation.

So far, about 6,200 sets of remains and nearly 2,800 missing people have been entered, said Kevin Lothridge, CEO of the National Forensic Science Technology Center in Largo, Fla., which runs NamUs for the Justice Department.

Detective Jim Shields of the Omaha, Neb., Police Department hadn't heard about NamUs until he saw a presentation at a conference in 2008. He then had a local volunteer associated with NamUs input his data on several missing people.

Among them was Luis Fernandez, who had been missing for nearly a year before his family went to police in 2008. Shields didn't have a lot on Fernandez, a known gang member who'd been in and out of jail - only gender, race, height, weight, age and some data on his tattoos.

It proved to be enough. Just a few weeks later, similarities were spotted with the unidentified remains of a homicide victim found in a farm field in Iowa in 2007. In January, a lab informed Shields it had a DNA match - and that he could break the news to Fernandez' family.

"I could say fairly certainly that this would never have been solved if not for NamUs," Shields said.

Some other recent successes:

- Paula Beverly Davis, of the Kansas City, Mo., area, had been missing for 22 years until a relative saw a public service announcement on TV in October for NamUs and told her sister, who gave it a try. Among the 10 matches her sister found were a body dumped in Ohio in 1987 that had the same rose and unicorn tattoos as her sister. DNA tests confirmed the body was Davis.

- Sonia Lente disappeared in 2002. Last June, an amateur cybersleuth with the Doe Network, a nationwide volunteer group that helps law enforcement solve cold cases, noticed similarities between Lente's description in NamUs and an unidentified body found near Albuquerque, N.M., in 2004. Dental records later established it was Lente.

Detective Stuart Somershoe of the Phoenix Police Department said his agency, which has over 500 open missing persons cases, just finished entering 100 cases into NamUs. He's hopeful his department can make a match.

"It's kind of time-consuming but I think it's a worthwhile program," Somershoe said.

NamUs grew out of a [Justice Department](#) task force working on the challenge of solving missing persons cases. One need that the task force identified was to give people who could help solve cases better access to database information.

"Billy's Law" sailed through the House late last month and is pending in the Senate, where supporters are confident it will easily pass.

The bill would authorize \$10 million in grants annually that police, sheriffs, medical examiners and coroners could use to train people to use NamUs and to help cover the costs of entering data into the system. It would also authorize another \$2.4 million a year to run the system and ensure permanent funding.

The bill would also link NamUs with a major FBI crime database that's now available only to [law enforcement](#), partly because it contains sensitive information about ongoing investigations. That confidential data would be withheld from NamUs when necessary.

Billy Smolinski, of Waterbury, Conn., was last seen Aug. 24, 2004, when he asked a neighbor to look after his dog. His pickup truck was later found outside his home, though not where he usually parked it. His wallet and other belongings were still inside.

The Smolinski family first struggled to get police to take a missing adult case seriously. It took a long time for investigators to finally conclude Billy had been killed, perhaps as a result of a love triangle gone sour. The family put up reward posters, searched places where they thought his body might have been hidden and kept pressure on police.

Smolinski said she came to see how police were often overwhelmed, but to her NamUs is a "no-brainer."

"If they find remains I'm hopeful they'll identify him through NamUs," Smolinski said.

More information: National Missing and Unidentified Persons System: <http://www.namus.gov>

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