FORENSICS TTA PROGRAM

# A Guide to Resources for Unidentified Human Remains Investigations

Every year, thousands of unidentified human remains (UHRs) are found across the United States, which poses a challenge for the law enforcement (LE) and medical examiners/coroners (ME/Cs) tasked with identifying these individuals and resolving the cases. UHR investigations are complex and require specialized skills and resources, such as forensic anthropology, DNA analysis, fingerprint record searches, dental coding and comparisons, facial reconstruction, and the use of missing persons databases and investigative resources. However, many agencies lack the necessary training, equipment, funding, or personnel to conduct these investigations effectively and efficiently. As a result, many UHR cases remain unresolved for years or decades, leaving families and communities without resolution and justice. This guide aims to provide agencies with information on federal programs and other organizational resources that offer support to these types of investigations.

## Programs and Organizations Offering Free Resources for UHR Investigations[1]

### National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs)

The Office of Justice Programs (OJP), National Institute of Justice (NIJ) **National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs)** database serves as a national centralized repository and resource center for missing, unidentified, and unclaimed person cases across the United States. NamUs helps investigators match long-term missing persons with UHRs to resolve cases and bring resolution to families. The database facilitates communication and data sharing between LE, ME/Cs, and families of the missing while providing advanced searching and cross-matching capabilities between the missing and unidentified decedent records. NamUs also provides free forensic and investigative support for UHR cases, including short tandem repeat (STR) and mitochondrial DNA testing with Combined DNA Index System (CODIS) entry, forensic genetic genealogy (FGG), fingerprint and dental coding/comparisons, anthropological assessments, analytical services, tattoo image searches, facial recognition searches, forensic art reconstructions, and cold case review from an experienced multidisciplinary team of LE, ME/Cs, and forensic professionals.

[1] This list of programs and organizations is not exhaustive.

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NamUs is currently administered through a contract with RTI International and serves as a central database and hub for all long-term UHRs and missing persons cases from across the United States, regardless of age, sex, race/ethnicity, or cause and manner of death. NamUs partners with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), accredited forensic laboratories, and certified forensic professionals to offer these services and serves as a liaison for the programs noted below to ensure all cases can access appropriate resources to aid in their resolution.

LE and ME/Cs are strongly encouraged to enter all UHR cases into NamUs to generate investigative leads and share case information with other criminal justice professionals and members of the public, and for many states, this entry is mandatory. To learn more about NamUs, including how to register and enter cases, please visit https://namus.nij.ojp.gov.

## Missing and Unidentified Human Remains (MUHR) Program

The Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) launched the **Missing and Unidentified Human Remains (MUHR) Program** in 2022, with the goal of providing funding and resources to state and local jurisdictions seeking to reduce backlogs of missing and unidentified persons cases. This program aims to *complement the services* offered by NamUs. Funding from MUHR provides resources to eligible entities to expand upon the reporting, transportation, processing, and identification of missing persons and UHRs. The funding also supports supplemental forensic processes such as anthropological analysis, fingerprint examination, FGG, and resources to assist with the required entry of case information into NamUs, the National Crime Information Center (NCIC), and the Violent Criminal Apprehension Program (ViCAP) in an effort to identify and repatriate UHRs to their next of kin. Of note, the MUHR program supports a separate purpose area designated to support small, rural, or Tribal entities. Currently, the Center for Human Identification (CHI) at UNT Health Fort Worth is a recipient of this unique purpose area and is able to allocate funding to support missing and unidentified cases in the United States with a Tribal nexus. For more information on the MUHR program, please visit https://bja.ojp.gov/program/muhr/overview.

## Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)

The **FBI** provides free STR and mitochondrial DNA analysis, anthropology, and fingerprint services for UHR cases from across the country, with priority given to cases originating from federal or Tribal jurisdictions. To request additional information on the FBI's UHR and missing persons services, please contact missingpersons@fbi.gov.

The FBI's NCIC is available to federal, state, Tribal, local, and other criminal justice agencies with access to LE-sensitive information. The FBI's Criminal Justice Information (CJIS) Division serves as the custodian of records, and these records are available to authorized LE and criminal justice agencies nationwide. NCIC's Unidentified Person File was established in 1983 and contains records of unidentified deceased persons, unidentified living persons, and catastrophe victims. Entering UHR cases into NCIC allows case information to be accessed by criminal justice agencies across the United States. For more information on NCIC, please visit https://le.fbi.gov/informational-tools/ncic.

In addition to maintaining NCIC, CJIS also oversees the Next Generation Identification (NGI) system. Formerly known as the Integrated Automated Fingerprint Identification System (IAFIS), NGI is a more advanced biometric database with enhanced fingerprint processing, latent and palm print searching, and iris and facial identification searches for LE and intelligence communities. The Deceased Persons Identification (DPI) Services leverages NGI's advanced search algorithms to compare fingerprints of unidentified persons against all prints maintained in the database, as well as the United States Department of Homeland Security and the United States Department of Defense's fingerprint systems. For more information on the NGI system and DPI services, please visit https://le.fbi.gov/science-and-lab/biometrics-and-fingerprints/biometrics/next-generation-identification-ngi.

The FBI's ViCAP may also be used to support UHR investigations. The ViCAP National Crime Database is a nationwide investigative repository that maintains case submissions from local, state, and Tribal agencies on violent crimes such as homicides, sexual assaults, missing persons, and UHR cases and can help identify patterns and link cases across jurisdictions. Additional ViCAP services include analytical products such as timelines and maps as well as investigative coordination among agencies. UHR cases where the manner of death is known or suspected to be a homicide are strongly encouraged to be entered into ViCAP. ViCAP can specifically assist on UHR cases by providing investigative leads on potential missing person case matches (including a search of dental information in databases such as NamUs and the NCIC Missing Person File) and identifying other similar homicide cases based on behavioral information. ViCAP can also assist by creating a ViCAP Alert, which highlights the UHR case on a one-page bulletin and is disseminated to a listserv of LE partners. For more information on obtaining ViCAP access or additional resources, please contact vicap@leo.gov or visit the ViCAP JusticeConnect page on the FBI's Law Enforcement Enterprise Portal (LEEP). For more information on LEEP, please visit https://le.fbi.gov/informational-tools/leep.

## National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC)

The **National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC)** works with families, victims, private industry, law enforcement, and the public to assist with preventing child abductions, recovering missing children, and providing services to deter and combat child sexual exploitation. Funded primarily by the OJP, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), NCMEC offers a range of services for UHR cases, including STR and mitochondrial DNA analysis, fingerprint and dental comparisons, anthropological examinations, facial reconstructions, analytical services, cold case reviews, evidence reviews, and other forensic methodologies such as entomology, pollen, and soil analysis. To learn more about NCMEC's resources, please visit https://www.missingkids.org/theissues/helpidme

## National Sexual Assault Kit Initiative (SAKI) Training and Technical Assistance (TTA) Purpose Area 2

In 2023, BJA expanded the **National Sexual Assault Kit Initiative (SAKI) Training and Technical Assistance (TTA)** to provide resources to current SAKI grantees seeking to identify UHRs who

were victims of homicides. These efforts are being led by CHI and focus on developing CODIS-eligible profiles for these UHR cases. The funding also supports FGG analysis once all other investigative leads have been exhausted. For more information on the SAKI program, please visit https://bja.ojp.gov/program/saki/overview or https://sakitta.org

### United States Customs and Border Protection's (CBP's) Missing Alien Program (MAP)

**United States Customs and Border Protection's (CBP's) Missing Alien Program (MAP)** seeks to prevent the loss of life among the alien population crossing the border into the United States in accordance with the Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains Act of 2019. This complex objective is achieved through alliances with police agencies, forensic doctors, non-governmental organizations, educational institutions, families, and citizens. Agents assigned to the MAP program often assist with calls of aliens missing or in distress and will coordinate various rescue efforts within their assigned sectors based on available information. Due to the border's dangerous terrain, extreme temperatures, and other factors leading to a high risk of death, CBP agents often locate decedents or skeletal remains that are challenging to identify.

MAP agents collect and share information related to a decedent's personal effects, fingerprints, and DNA samples (when viable) to assist agencies tasked with their identification. CBP also collects and stores information related to all border apprehensions, which can include photographs, fingerprint records, known family or associates, and other pertinent information that can aid in alien UHR cases. CBP has implemented facial recognition software to assist investigators with identification efforts when qualified facial photos are obtained from decedents. MAP agents work closely with foreign consulates to obtain missing persons reports, fingerprint records, and can help coordinate DNA collections from families who are located outside the United States.

For more information on the MAP, please visit https://www.cbp.gov/border-security/along-us-borders/missing-alien-program.

## Considerations for Selecting the Best Resources for UHR Investigations

Collaborative efforts across all programs and organizations are critical to ensure adequate resources are appropriately allocated to these investigations. It is up to the lead investigating agency to contact each appropriate program and organization that could support their investigation. A single entity may not have the ability to provide the required resources to each investigation, and as such, agencies are encouraged to explore all available options while striving to minimize the duplication of efforts through effective communication. The graphic on the following page is presented as a tool to help identify which resources may be best suited for your case.

# Enter the Unidentified Human Remains (UHR) case into the relevant databases:

## NamUs

National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) staff will help direct resources to the case and can recommend alternate funding streams available depending on the case type. To enter your case or for more information, visit https://namus.nij.ojp.gov.

## NCIC

If your agency does not have access to the National Crime Information Center (NCIC), contact your local law enforcement agency and request a courtesy UHR entry be completed on your agency's behalf. For more information on how to enter cases into NCIC, contact the NCIC Training Team at 877-FBI-NCIC (324-6242) or NCICtraining@fbi.gov.

## ViCAP

If the manner of death is known or suspected to be a homicide, enter the UHR case into the Violent Criminal Apprehension Program (ViCAP). For more information on obtaining ViCAP access or additional resources, contact vicap@leo.gov.

**HELPFUL HINT:** If fingerprints were obtained from your UHR case, contact the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to run the fingerprint card against all available databases before requesting DNA analysis. To submit deceased UHR prints for continuous searches and retention in the Next Generation Identification (NGI) system, agencies with an Originating Agency Identifier (ORI) number may send them to the FBI Special Processing Center at SPC@leo.gov. For additional unidentified or missing person questions or inquiries related to NGI, contact dpiservices@fbi.gov.

# For additional support for UHR investigations, including DNA analysis and Forensic Genetic Genealogy requests, consider the following:

### Is the UHR believed to be a child?

Contact the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) (forensics@ncmec.org).

### Does the case fall under federal jurisdiction?

Contact the FBI (missingpersons@fbi.gov).

### Does the UHR have a tribal affiliation?

Contact the Center for Human Identification (CHI) at UNT Health Fort Worth, a Missing and Unidentified Human Remains (MUHR) grantee (ISU@unthsc.edu), or the FBI (missingpersons@fbi.gov).

### Is the UHR believed to be an individual who went missing while crossing the Southwest border?

Contact the U.S. Customs and Border Protection's (CBP's) Missing Alien Program (MAP) (USBPMissingMigrantProgram@cbp.dhs.gov).

### Is the UHR a victim of a homicide?

Contact CHI, a Sexual Assault Kit Initiative (SAKI) Purpose Area 2 grantee (ISU@unthsc.edu). This resource is available to SAKI grantees and agencies that fall within the purview of a SAKI grantee. For a list of SAKI grantees, visit https://sakitta.org/sakisites or contact the SAKI Training and Technical Assistance (TTA) Team (sakitta@rti.org).

### Can the case be supported by a MUHR grant?

Contact the Forensics TTA Team (ForensicsTTA@rti.org). This resource is available to MUHR grantees and agencies that fall within the purview of a MUHR grantee. For a list of MUHR grantees, visit https://www.forensicstta.org/programs/missing-and-unidentified-human-remains-muhr-program or contact the Forensics TTA Team (ForensicsTTA@rti.org).

*If the required resources are unavailable via these additional programs and organizations, reconnect with NamUs staff (https://namus.nij.ojp.gov/contact) to determine potential next steps.*

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