

Operation Identification: Minimum Standards for Managing the Dead

Justice of the Peace Inquest Webinar
November 13, 2024

Kate Spradley, PhD; Molly Kaplan, MA

Overview

- **Glossary**
- **Operation Identification (OpID)**
- **Legal Statutes and Principles**
- **Identification Process**
- **Minimum Components**

Glossary

- **Antemortem:** occurring before death
- **Perimortem:** occurring at or around the time of death
- **Postmortem:** occurring after death
- *In situ:* in its place
- **NamUs:** National Missing and Unidentified Person System
- **CODIS:** Combined DNA Index System
- **Traceability:** ability to trace bodies, personal effects, and documentation throughout the process of medicolegal death investigation, including locating bodies after final disposition



OPERATION IDENTIFICATION

NUMBERS to NAMES

Locate | Exhume | Identify | Repatriate



Fingerprints, DNA, and Remote Case Management

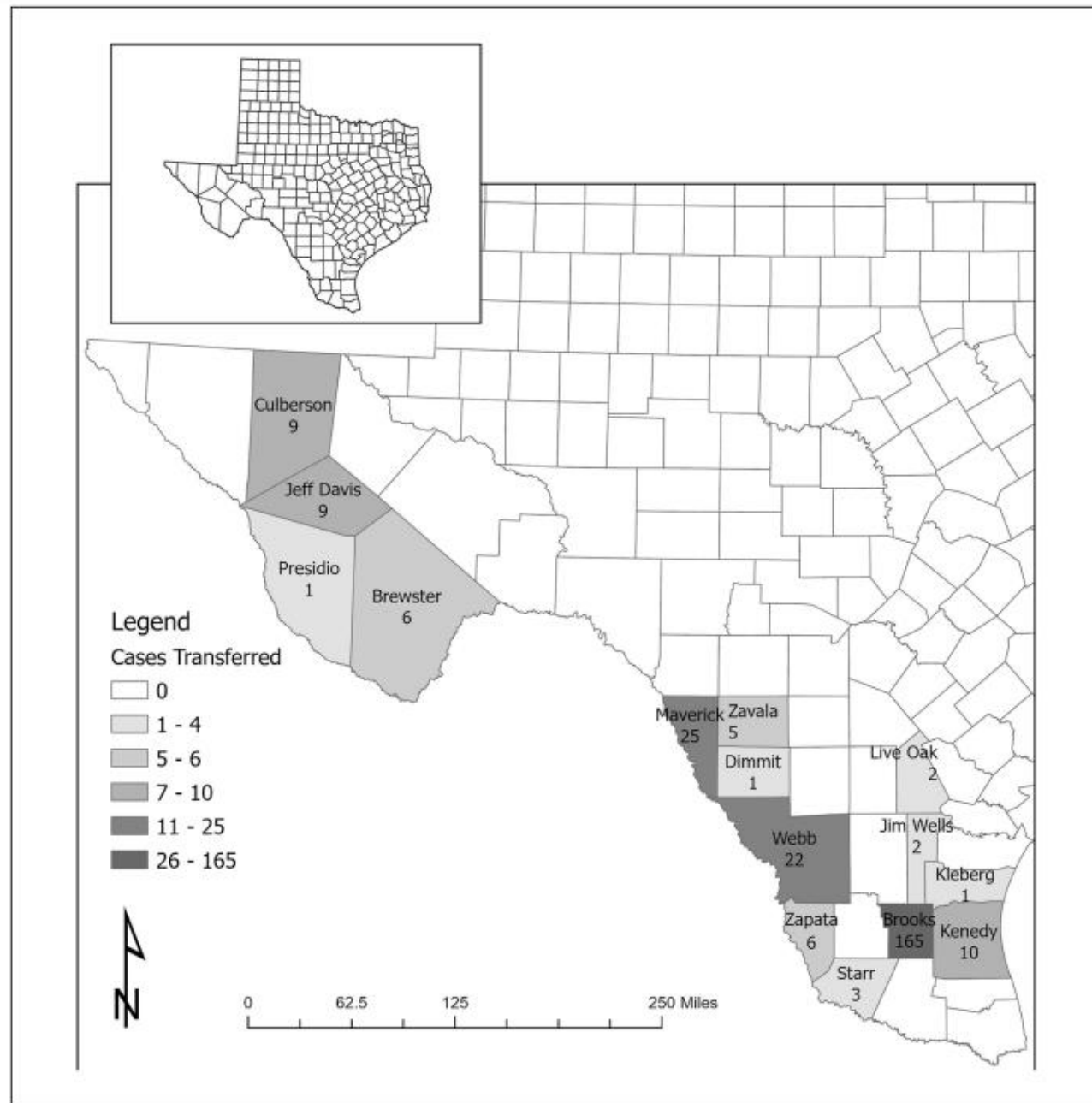


Brooks County Cold Storage - 2018

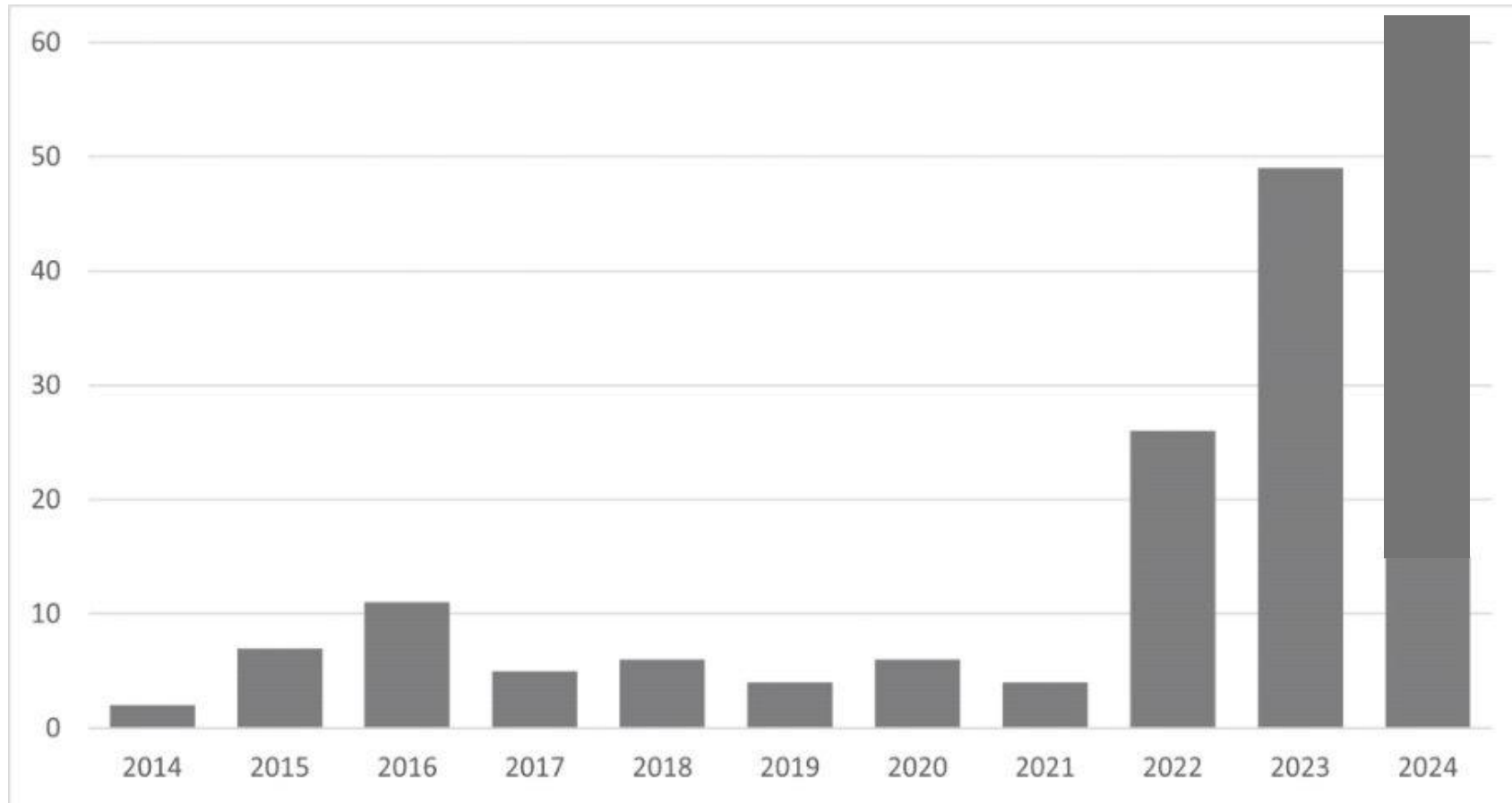
- Deputies fingerprint remains
- Compared to Customs and Border Patrol Database
- ~90% identification rate
- ~10% sent to OpID



Locations that use OpID Services

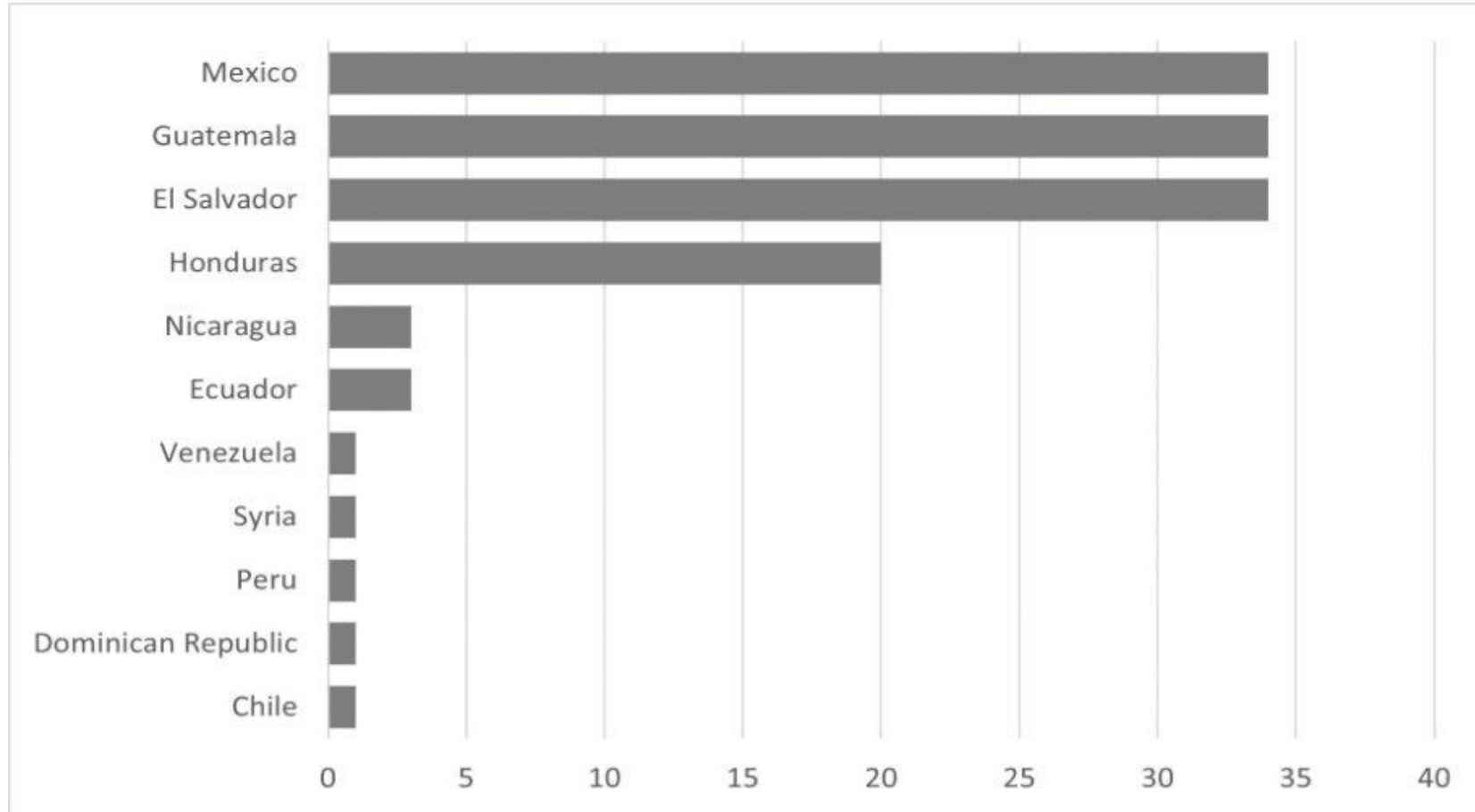


OpID facilitated Identifications



Since 2013, OpID has managed over 600 unidentified persons cases, over 200 individuals have been forensically identified.

Countries of Origin



**Not listed: Côte d'Ivoire

Legal Statutes and Principles

- **Texas Code of Criminal Procedures (TCCP) §49**
 - Inquest/investigation into the identity of the decedent, in addition to cause and manner of death (Art. 04 Sec. a)
 - Collect fingerprints, postmortem dental chart, photographs/notes (Art. 10 Sec. l-m)
 - Record & maintain all information on burial location for no less than 10 years (Art. 09 Sec. e)
 - Sign death certificate (Art. 16)
 - Report death to Missing Persons Clearinghouse and National Crime Information Center (Art. 04 Sec. d)
 - Enter unidentified persons data into NamUs (Art. 04 Sec. e)
- **TCCP §63**
 - Requires a DNA sample be submitted to the University of North Texas Center for Human Identification (UNTCHI) for identification purposes (Art. 056 Sec. a)
- **Humanitarian Principles**
 - Dead managed with dignity and in perpetuity
 - Families of missing/dead have right to know fate and whereabouts of loved ones

Methods of Identification

- Scientific
 - Fingerprint → law enforcement, Border Patrol MMP, FBI, NamUs
 - DNA → UNTCHI
 - Medical records comparison
 - Dental charting/radiography
- Non-Scientific
 - Circumstantial
 - Visual recognition
 - Visual comparison

Minimum Components

Coding

Allocating a unique code to each body

Recovery

Placing each body in a bag with appropriate labels

Recording

Recording all relevant data, photographing each body

Collection

Collecting and managing information relevant for identification

Submission

Ensuring samples/information adequately submitted for identification

Storage

Ensuring orderly temporary or long-term storage of bodies

Traceability

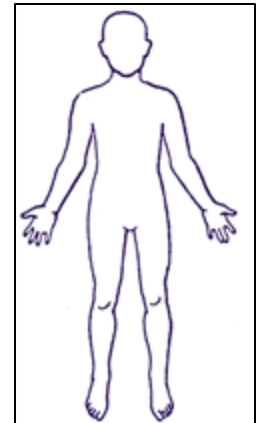
Retaining information on location of each body

Coding:

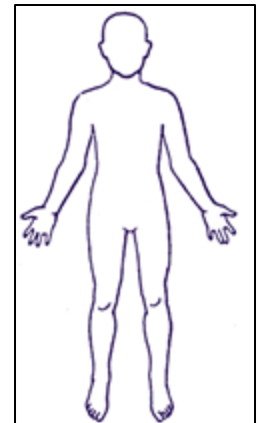
Allocating a Unique Case
Number

Coding

- A unique code/case number must be allocated to **each body or body part**
- **Purpose:** To avoid loss of bodies, to ensure documentation & traceability
- **Standardized & logical: Location, Year, Sequence**
 - Attached to the body at all times (waterproof)
- All information recorded about the body is also given this unique code
 - Included in all photographs
 - Same code assigned to all associated personal effects
- **Tracked in a centralized place with all other associated case codes**
 - Law enforcement, Medical Examiner, Border Patrol, etc.
 - Logbook, Excel spreadsheet, computer database



ML 2017- 0005



ML 2017- 0006

Considerations

Assign a unique code to each body (body part) as soon as possible

Attach the unique code to the body (body part) and its container

Is the code consistently applied? Is it sequential and logical?

Is your case log regularly updated, maintained, and stored in a place that is accessible?

Are associated case numbers (e.g. law enforcement number, ME number, OpID number) being tracked?

Recovery:

Recovering bodies and personal effects

Recovering Bodies

- Effective recovery of dead bodies enables future identification
- Before recovery, the body and personal effects should be photographed *in situ*
- Information about the scene should be recorded, including location body found (record **GPS coordinates**) and photographed
- Body/personal effects should be placed individually in body bags at the scene
- Dignity of the dead should be maintained
- Bodies should be kept secured and in the coolest location possible during investigation
 - Protected from direct sunlight, scavengers and public viewing

Recording:

Record all Relevant
Information

Documentation

- Responsibility of JPs to record all case information and initiate a death certificate
- Documentation starts at the beginning of the investigation/recovery
 - Photographs (with case number and scale)
 - Handwritten notes (on standardized forms)
 - GPS/location data
- Information vital for identification may be lost as bodies decompose

Data Recorded

- Upon arrival at the scene using **standardized forms**
- General condition and state of preservation
- Location of body
- Physical characteristics and external appearance
 - Sex, height, weight, build, unique markings, scars, tattoos, dentition
- Personal effects or belongings on or near the body

Data Recorded

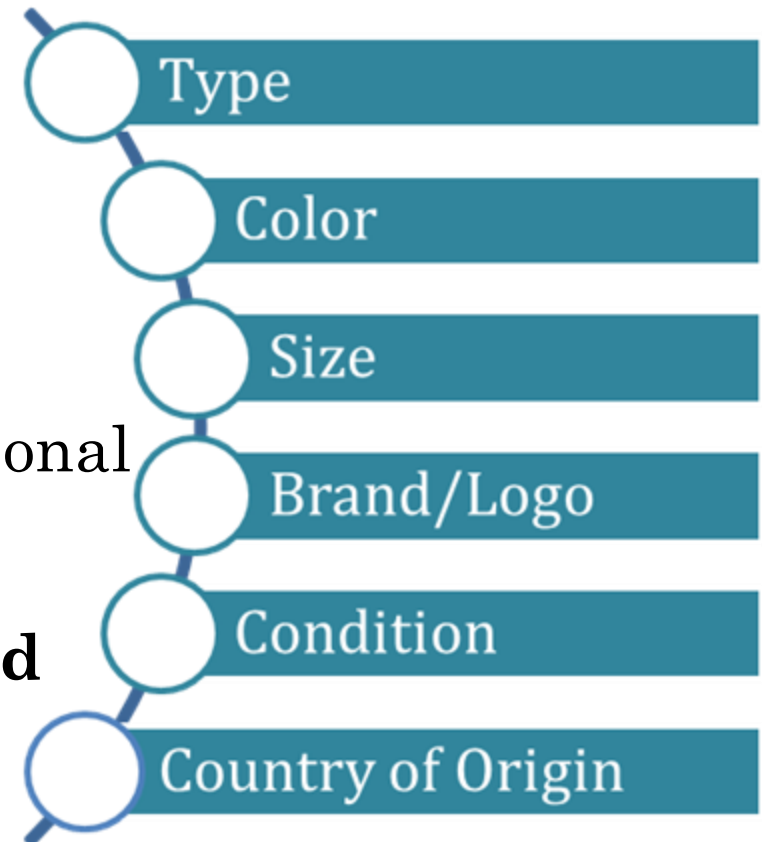
- Separating personal effects from the body makes identification difficult in the future
- Bodies, personal effects, and other case data (forms, photographs), must be **traceable**



Personal Effects

Recording

- Documented and recovered with body
- Assigned same unique case code as the body
- **Accompany body until repatriated**
- Check seams, shoes, and liners for hidden personal effects (e.g. ID cards)
- **If buried, place personal effects in a sealed container within body bag** to protect from decomposition fluids



Storing Data

- All data/images should be stored in **centralized, secure location**, not stored on personal hard drives, flash drives, or phones
- Hard copies of standardized forms placed in file folders or 3 ring binder
 - Digitize (or scan) forms and retain

Standardized Forms

Unique code: (Use this same code on associated files, photographs or stored objects.)
Possible identity of body (Explain reasons for attributing a possible identity):
Person completing this form Name: _____ Official status: _____ Place & date: _____ Signature: _____
Recovery details (include place, date, time, by whom found, and circumstances of finding. Give GPS coordinates if available. Indicate if other bodies were recovered in the same area, including name and possible relationship, if identified)

Unique Code: _____						
A. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION						
A.1	General condition (mark one):	a)	Complete body	Incomplete body (describe):		Body part (describe):
		b)	Well preserved	Decomposed	Partially skeletonized	Fully skeletonized
A.2	Apparent sex (mark one and describe evidence):	Male			Female	Undetermined
		Describe evidence (genitals, beard, etc):				
A.3	Age group (mark one):	Infant	Child	Adolescent	Adult	Elderly
A.4	Physical description (measure or mark one):	Height (crown to heel with units):		Short	Average	Tall
		Weight (specify units):		Slim	Average	Fat
A.5	a) Head hair:	Colour:	Length:	Shape:	Baldness:	Other:
	b) Facial hair:	None	Moustache	Beard	Colour:	Length:
	c) Body hair	Describe:				
A.6	Distinguishing features:	Use additional sheets if needed. If possible, include a sketch of the main findings. Note if photographs taken (include unique code in all photographs)				
	Physical (e.g. old amputations – limbs, fingers)					
	Surgical prosthesis (e.g. artificial limb)					
	Skin marks – (scars, tattoos, piercings, birthmarks, moles, etc.), specify location					
	Apparent injuries: include location, side					
	Dental conditions: (crowns, gold teeth, adornments, false teeth). Describe any obvious features					

Unique Code: _____		
B. ASSOCIATED EVIDENCE		
B.1	Clothing:	Type of clothes, colours, fabrics, brand names, repairs. Describe in as much detail as possible
B.2	Footwear:	Type (boot, shoes, sandals), colour, brand, size. Describe in as much detail as possible
B.3	Eyewear:	Glasses (colour, shape), contact lenses. Describe in as much detail as possible
B.4	Personal items:	Watch, jewellery, wallet, keys, photographs, mobile phone (include number), medication, cigarettes, etc. Describe in as much detail as possible
B.5	Identity Documents	Identity card, passport, driving licence, credit card, etc. Take photograph if possible (including the unique code in the photograph). Describe the information contained in them

Collection:

Collecting and Managing
Information Relevant for
Identification

Relevant Information

- Data collected for identification purposes
 - Fingerprints
 - sheriff's office, ME, law enforcement, Border Patrol, OpID
 - DNA samples
 - sheriff's office, ME, law enforcement, OpID
 - Dental charting/radiographs
 - ME, forensic odontologist, forensic anthropologist
 - Forensic anthropological analysis
 - forensic anthropologist, OpID
- Photographic documentation for identification assistance
 - Tattoos
 - Fingerprints

Fingerprints

- Ensure fingerprints of decedents are collected in all cases
 - Traditional method (i.e. fingerprint card/ink)
 - Digital fingerprinting
 - **Macrophotography**
- In difficult cases, it is still possible to obtain fingerprints (FBI/MMP) - <https://fbibiospecs.fbi.gov/video-repository>
 - Mummified/desiccated tissues
 - Decomposed
 - Waterlogged



DNA Samples

- **2 or 3 should be taken from unidentified bodies prior to release or burial**
- Blood stain card
- Hair with root/follicle attached
- Hand/foot bones or loose bones (e.g., rib)
- Teeth
- Section of long bone (e.g., thigh or arm bones)
- Embalmed bodies or samples of unknown origins not accepted

Tattoos

- **All tattoos should be documented** (described and photographed)
 - If possible photograph using infrared/near-infrared light source
 - Photograph before and after removal of slipped skin
 - WD-40 can help in cleaning/brightening tattoos for photos
- Information on tattoos should be shared with appropriate coordinating agencies (e.g., NamUs, MMP, consular offices, local NGOs)

Submission:

Ensuring samples/information
adequately submitted for
identification

DPS Missing Persons Clearinghouse & NCIC

- TCCP Ch. 49 Art. 04 Sec. d: “A justice of the peace investigating a death described by Subsection (a)(3)(B) shall report the death to the **missing children and missing persons information clearinghouse** of the *Department of Public Safety* and the **national crime information center** not later than the **10th working day after** the date the investigation began.
 - Contact at Texas DPS:

Heidi Prather.

Manager, TxDPS Missing and Unidentified Persons/DNA Unit

Texas Ranger Analytical Support Crimes Against Children

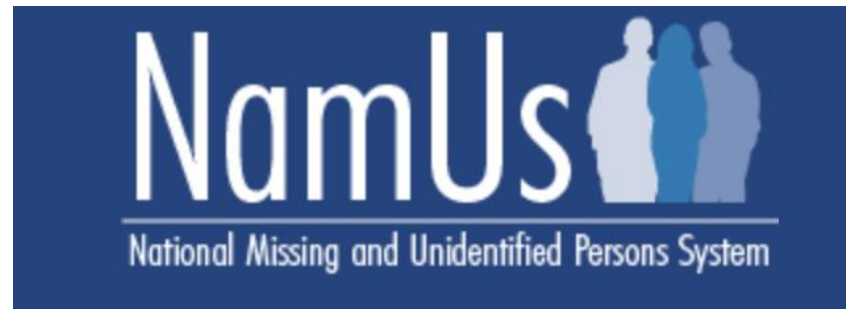
512-424-2814

heidi.prather@dps.texas.gov

National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs)

- Art. 04 Sec. e: “**A justice of the peace investigating a death** described by Subsection (a)(3)(B), or the justice's designee, shall, not later than the **10th working day after** the date that one or more identifying features of the unidentified body are determined or the **60th day after the date the investigation began**, whichever is earlier, enter all available identifying features of the unidentified body (fingerprints, dental records, any unusual physical characteristics, and a description of the clothing found on the body) into the *National Missing and Unidentified Persons System*.”
- Jessica A. Ruiz
NamUS Regional System Administrator-Central Region
Contractor Supporting OJP/NIJ
Web: <https://namus.nij.ojp.gov>
Email: jruiz@rti.org
Phone: 817.735.0553

NamUs

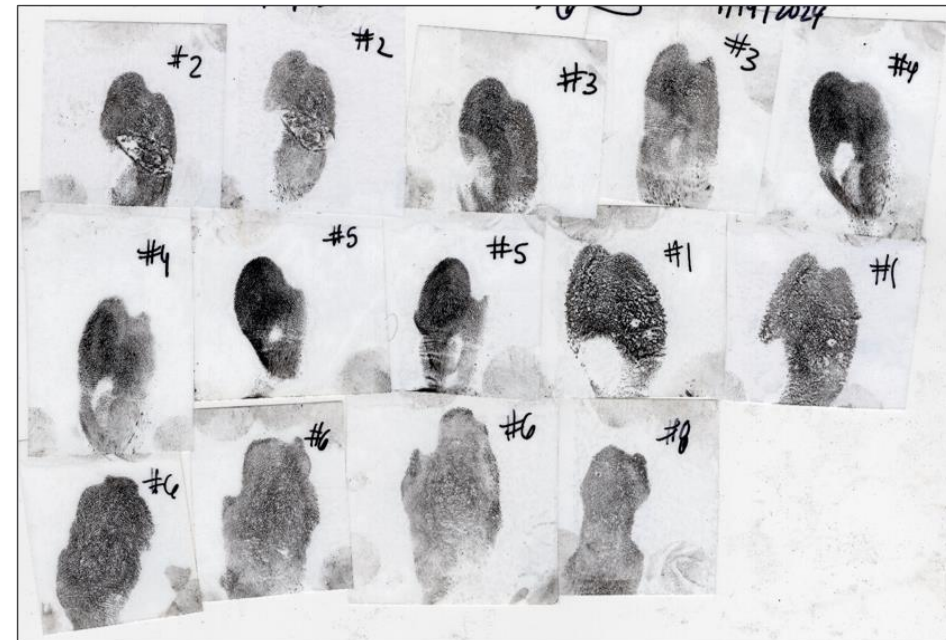


Submission

- Online, centralized repository for missing, unidentified, and unclaimed person cases
- Searchable by the public (English and Spanish)
 - Professional Users can hide certain information
- Generates potential matches between Unidentified Persons and Missing Persons
- **Register as Coroner to create professional user account at namus.gov**
- Unidentified Person Entries
 - Include descriptions, photographs, and radiographs (if available)
 - **Upload postmortem fingerprint card**
 - **Record disposition of remains** (cemetery, lot/plot number, etc.)

Fingerprints

- **Fingerprints for unidentified bodies should be digitized, uploaded to NamUs, and shared with appropriate agencies:**
 - US Border Patrol's Missing Migrant Program (MMP)
 - FBI's Latent Print Unit
 - Local law enforcement agencies



DNA Samples

- Required to submit to the **University of North Texas Center for Human Identification (UNTCHI; TCCP Ch.63)** for identification
 - **Free to entire state of Texas**
 - DNA profiled by UNTCHI will be uploaded to the **Combined DNA Index System (CODIS)** at the state and national levels
- DNA samples may also be submitted to other labs/agencies
- Additional samples should be retained before burial in case sample resubmission needed

Storage:

Ensuring orderly temporary or long-term storage of bodies

Storage of Bodies

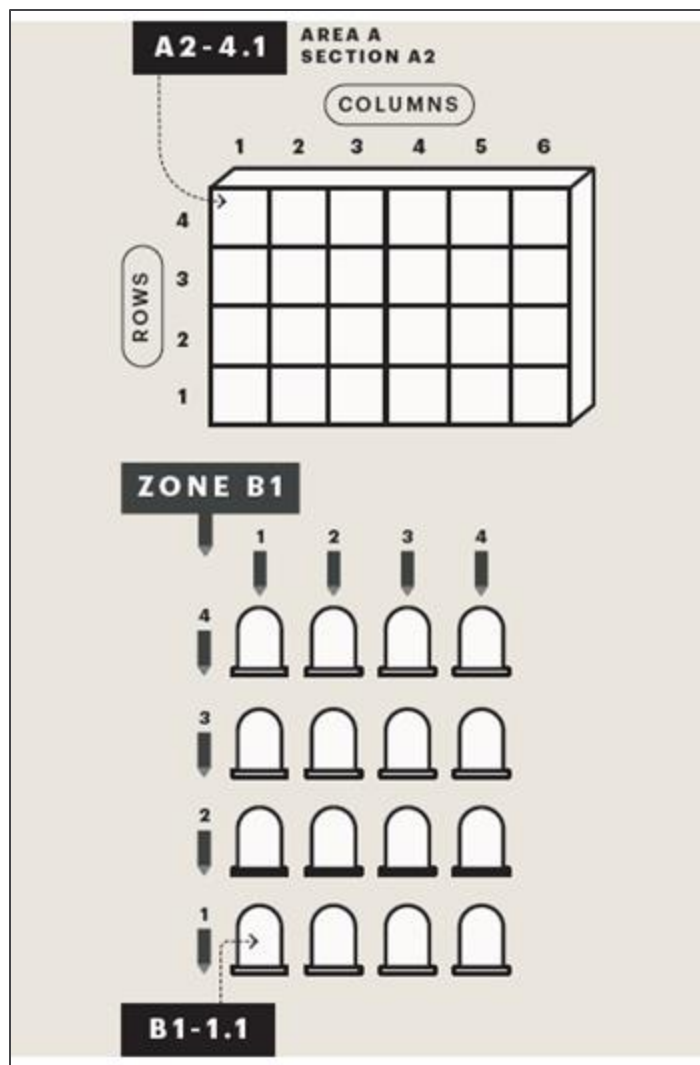
- Preserve and protect the bodies as best as possible during investigation
- Unidentified bodies can be temporarily buried
 - Only once all evidence is collected & submitted
 - Extra DNA sample retained
- **Unidentified and unclaimed bodies should never be cremated or commingled**

Storage of Bodies

- Refrigeration - best
 - Refrigerated transport containers

- Alternative storage
 - Cool and protected rooms or environment
 - **Burials with documentation of GPS coordinates**
 - Label burial container and remains with unique code number
 - Waterproof, lamination, labels inside & outside container
 - Must be able to re-locate if identified in the future

Burial Considerations



- Graves should be visibly demarcated on the surface
- Bodies should **NOT** be buried on top of each other
- Bodies should be placed in burial containers (e.g. body bags, coffins)
- **Record cemetery, plot, lot, area, zone, GPS coordinates**
 - Mark on map
 - Enter in NamUs

Traceability:

Retaining information on the location of each body

Traceability

- Traceability
 - Refers to ability to track bodies (recovery to final disposition)
 - Ensures exact location of bodies, personal effects, and documentation are known
 - Allows for investigation/identification in the future
 - Provides families and communities a place to pay tribute to their loved ones
- Ensure traceability of bodies by marking, mapping, recording and centrally storing precise location of final disposition
- **Do not rely on funeral homes to provide you with the location of burials.**

NamUs Disposition

Traceability

Additional Case Info

Indicates information not viewable by the public

Autopsy Facility

[Edit](#)

Agency

--

State

Texas

Phone

--

Contact Email

pfarley@rgv.rr.com

Notes

Valley Forensics, PLLC.
Dr. Norma Farley

Disposition of Remains

[Edit](#)

Cooler Number

--

Cemetery Name

Val Verde Cemetery

Plot Number

16

Date Buried

December 17, 2015

Notes

Section: U
Space: 25

Identification & Repatriation

- Repatriation can occur when
 - An identification has been approved by appropriate jurisdictional authority
 - A death certificate is filed or decedent's name has been amended on original death certificate
 - Agency initiating original death certificate is responsible for changing name on the death certificate
- **An identification is not complete until the family/next of kin is respectfully notified and they accept the means of identification**

Summary

- Ensure **traceability** by incorporating these minimum components
 - Coding
 - Recovery
 - Recording
 - Collection
 - Submission
 - Storage
- **NamUs** serves as a tool to
 - Record/manage information
 - Locate potential matches
 - Facilitate traceability

