Statewide Cold Case and Missing & Unidentified Persons Advisory and Accountability Board

Oklahoma Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) Presenting Personnel

- Drs. Sara Getz & Carlos Zambrano – Forensic Anthropologists / Long-Term Unidentified Case Managers (OCME Central Office)
- Timothy Dwyer – Operations Director

Number of Unidentified Remains Cases

- OCME performs approx. 8,000 physical exams per year with approx. 100 per month brought in as unidentified persons (UP) where scientific ID (e.g., fingerprints, medical/dental x-rays, DNA) is required.
- Vast majority of individuals identified within 24 hours, primarily using fingerprints.
- 1-5 cases per year take more than 1 year to identify
- Currently approx. 125 UP in Oklahoma (41 are buried awaiting exhumation)

How Unidentified Remains Are Entered/Tracked

- All unidentified individuals are tracked internally within OCME database and using NamUs - managed by four OCME forensic anthropologists (FAs).
- Per statute known as Francine's Law [74 Okla. Stat. §151.3 (2019)], all unidentified remains are entered into NamUs within 30 days.
- FAs coordinate entry of information into NamUs (e.g., fingerprints, x-rays, dental photos) to aid in immediate comparisons across the United States.

NamUs Participation

- Oklahoma is a well-known NamUs "superuser" for both missing persons (MP) and UP cases which allows for much quicker comparisons and feedback to families and LE.
- Based on NamUs entries, UNTCHI requested case submissions for multiple grants.
- NamUs requested OCME partnership for presentation at national forensic conference.

DNA Collection and Comparison

- If ID cannot be made using fingerprints or medical/dental x-rays, samples are submitted to an appropriate DNA lab based on sample type and available comparison samples.
- No line-item in OCME budget for DNA testing. Relying on grant funds awarded to other agencies—not a viable long-term strategy.

Family Reference Samples (FRS)

- Success of DNA comparisons relies on the availability of samples for comparison.
- OCME and OSBI co-host Missing in Oklahoma Day (MiOK Day) x2 per year throughout Oklahoma where families can create/update MP profiles and provide FRS DNA.
- Beyond MiOK Day, OCME personnel routinely collect family reference samples and coordinate with OSBI and other law enforcement (LE) agencies to obtain others.
- Currently relying on grant funds awarded to other agencies to process FRS samples.

Barriers to Identification

- *Lack of MP awareness and data for comparison.*
  - Families do not always report to LE, and some LE will not take MP reports
  - Reported MP not entered in NamUs by LE (as required by state statute)
  - NamUs MP profiles include little to no information for comparison and are not updated.
- *Scientific Identifications*
  - Sometimes limited or no information available for comparison.
  - Loss of OK Fingerprint Data - Approx. 1000 individuals per year identified OCME using fingerprints. As of February 2026, OK no longer taking DL and ID fingerprints which will severely hinder and slow decedent identifications.
  - Cost - Relying on grants from other agencies/states for DNA testing is not a viable long-term strategy. IDs often not made as quickly as possible.
- *Comparisons at the OCME*
  - OCME database is 26 years old, at end of life, and has limited capabilities
  - Network changes severely slowing ability to save, transfer, and review data critical for daily operations

Advances in Forensic Anthropology and DNA Technology

- Adding two FAs (4 total) in past 4 yrs. allowed a renewed focus on cold cases – more than 40 IDs of long-term MP/UP, including 14 missing prior to 1998
- Radiocarbon "bomb-pulse" dating to screen cases to determine how old they are and if DNA is necessary – significant cost/time savings to OCME and other agencies.
- Postmortem computed tomography scanner (PMCT) and OCME access to online medical records portals – Allows rapid ID (24-48 hours from time of exam) by FAs using medical/dental x-rays compared to weeks-to-months with DNA.
- Forensic Investigative Genetic Genealogy (FIGG) - generates leads for tentative IDs in presumed homicide cases even when FRS samples are not available

When Jurisdictional Responsibility is Unclear

- Primarily an issue for MP cases where last known location is unclear.
- For UP skeletal remains cases, OCME works with local, state, tribal, and federal partners while they determine jurisdiction.
  - The OCME is working with Tribal Nations to develop MOUs to address inadvertent discoveries of skeletal remains that may potentially be missing persons.

Where does the current system break down between a missing-person report, an unidentified person, forensic identification, and ultimately resolution for the family?

- LE Education / MP Entry – need trained NamUs users that know what questions to ask /information to find information to facilitate ID
- Funding – OCME needs to screen remains efficiently (radiocarbon dating), track unidentified persons (OCME database), maintain technology for scientific identification (PMCT), allow for DNA testing at the most appropriate lab, and retain sufficient, qualified personnel to perform these functions in a timely manner.