

A144 Identification Notifications and Their Applicability to Families of Missing Migrants

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the relevance of the protocol designed and successfully applied by the Argentine forensic anthropology team, Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense (EAAF), for identification notifications to families of missing or disappeared people, particularly in missing migrant cases.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by: (1) highlighting the gaps in documentation and communication that have led to insufficient or inappropriate notifications; (2) offering suggestions to improve this critical moment for families receiving information; and, (3) discussing considerations of a wider role for forensic scientists in the notification process. The goal of EAAF's notification protocol utilized in cases of disappeared people and missing migrants is to significantly improve the information, documentation, and circumstances in which notifications of remains identifications take place so family members can end their uncertainty regarding the fate of their loved ones.

In many countries, forensic specialists are typically not involved in the notification of identifications to the respective family. Further, in EAAF's experience with families of victims of human rights violations and, more recently, with families of missing migrants, it has been apparent that in numerous countries, whether forensic experts are involved or not, there are no specific protocols regarding how to conduct notifications. Yet, the notification of identification is a critical moment that may jeopardize excellent forensic work if not performed properly. In the migrant context, the absence of an identification report, the communication to families over the phone of identification from one country to another, the delivery of sealed coffins with the instruction to not open them, among other practices reported by families of missing migrants, often leave them with an open, severely painful doubt regarding identification results instead of the identification ending their uncertainty.

The Border Project, coordinated by the EAAF beginning in 2009, seeks to create a regional forensic mechanism throughout the Central America, Mexico, and United States migrant corridor to significantly improve both the identifications of missing migrants among unidentified remains in the region and the response of governments to families searching for missing migrant relatives. As part of this initiative, the project addresses the need to alleviate the doubts regarding an identification; such doubts are increased in the context experienced by families of missing migrants due to death occurring in a foreign country where they typically cannot afford to travel and often occurring in unknown circumstances. To truly evaluate the effectiveness of the work of forensic scientists on the impact of identifications on affected families, the significance of the notification process must also be evaluated, particularly the importance of forensic specialists' involvement. The Forensic Data Banks on missing migrants and related mechanisms that are currently part of the Border Project in El Salvador, Honduras, and parts of Mexico and Guatemala are applying a notification protocol that derives largely from EAAF's experience in other types of cases, such as enforced disappearances, to the migrant context.

EAAF's notification protocol involves several phases, including: the compilation, data verification, and review of all case materials prior to scheduling a notification; the completion of an integrated, multidisciplinary identification report in the family's language; risk assessment of the family receiving a notification, be it health related or threat from other persons; conducting the notification in person with the family; providing psychological and medical support; and explaining the repatriation process, among others.

Collaborative and centralized efforts involving forensic, governmental, and non-governmental institutions internationally are crucial to reaching the point of identification notification with all available information in place and to facilitating its delivery in the best way possible. The benefit of EAAF's protocol model is that it affords families clear and accessible forensic and circumstantial information on the death of their loved ones, assisting directly in their mourning process; it helps to standardize a critical moment in the identification of remains process and can be widely adapted in ongoing humanitarian efforts. It is through this tested mechanism that families can be ensured of their right to information, truth, and reparation. Conducting forensic work involves responsibilities not

only to the dead but also to the living and, as a result, requires that the Border Project serve the families of missing migrants by ending their uncertainty in cases in which their missing relatives have died.

Forensic Anthropology, Identification Notifications, Migrant Deaths