

A142 Addressing the Challenges of Migrant Death Investigations Through Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) and Government Agency Collaborations

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After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand how collaborations between NGOs and government agencies are essential to unidentified human remains investigations throughout Central and North America, particularly along the United States-Mexico border.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by highlighting challenges that medicolegal systems face along the United States-Mexico border and by presenting how those challenges are often overcome through collaborations with NGOs.

The purpose of this study is to: (1) explore how three NGOs have partnered with different government agencies in unique ways to facilitate investigations of deceased migrants in specific regions; (2) compare the similarities and differences between the different strategies they have employed; and, (3) discuss how collaborations between these NGOs create a unified model for addressing a humanitarian crisis. Data analyzed include: the protocols for each NGO/government agency collaboration, the number of cases investigated, the number of family reference DNA samples collected, and the number of identifications through collaborations. Additionally, case studies will illustrate general challenges and how these obstacles are overcome.

Migration across Central America and the United States-Mexico border is a dangerous and often deadly process. Investigations of migrant deaths are complicated by sociopolitical and geographical factors, resulting in challenges for the government agencies responsible for properly investigating these deaths. For example, many families live in countries far from the location of the death of their loved one, making it difficult for investigating agencies to obtain family reference DNA samples for comparisons to unidentified human remains. Furthermore, many families are afraid to meet with law enforcement, let alone submit a biological sample to a feared agency. Consequently, many of these investigations are incomplete.

In Central America and Mexico, the Argentine forensic anthropology team, Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense (EAAF), facilitates the creation of forensic data banks on missing migrants, with case files containing all background and antemortem data, as well as DNA profiles from direct relatives for genetic comparisons. These forensic data banks are composed of governmental and non-governmental institutions, an unprecedented development in the region, allowing direct participation from the NGO sector, particularly committees of relatives, to monitor and inform work of government officials. Forensic data banks currently exist in Honduras, El Salvador, and Chiapas and Oaxaca in Mexico. As of July 2016, EAAF has 929 missing migrant cases, 2,520 family reference DNA samples, and has made 117 identifications through these data banks.

In Pima County, AZ, the Colibrí Center for Human Rights' process relies on building strong relationships with both families of the missing and the officials tasked with the investigation of unidentified remains. Colibrí is based in Arizona and works most closely with the PCOME, which has provided in-kind support to Colibrí in the form of office space and equipment, allowing the collaboration to be a regular part of the daily investigation process at this county office. Colibrí supports the investigation of migrant cases in Pima County by managing all incoming inquiries from families of missing migrants, providing detailed antemortem data to forensic practitioners, and producing identification hypotheses that can then be followed up scientifically. Colibrí has assisted with the investigation of hundreds of cases at the PCOME and several cases in Texas and in California. Colibrí's database includes records for more than 2,000 missing migrants last seen crossing the United States-Mexico border.

In Brooks County, TX, the South Texas Human Rights Center (STHRC) has established a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Brooks County Sheriff's Office (BCSO) that allows the STHRC to investigate both missing persons and unidentified human remains cases on behalf of the BCSO. As a result, the STHRC, in collaboration with other organizations, has assisted with the investigation of more than 200 missing persons cases, the collection of family reference samples from more than 40 families, the identifications of more than 10 deceased

individuals, and the finding of more than 40 missing individuals, some whose lives were saved by search and rescue efforts.

Collaborations between NGOs and government agencies are essential to the investigations of missing migrants and unidentified human remains found throughout Central and North America. Both reported statistics and presented case studies illustrate the strengths of involving NGOs in these investigations, as they combine diverse, multidisciplinary perspectives while working with families to resolve these investigations.

Migrant Deaths, Regional Collaborations, Non-Government Organizations