

# Forming a Cold Case Unit and Unit Expectations

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NATIONAL RESOURCE & TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER  
FOR IMPROVING LAW ENFORCEMENT INVESTIGATIONS



**BJA**  
Bureau of Justice Assistance  
U.S. Department of Justice

# Webinar Speaker

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# Webinar Objectives

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- *What is a Cold Case and How are They Solved* article and webinar (first part of series)
- Establish the full breadth of what cold cases are – Unsolved Murders, Long-term Missing Persons/Unidentified Persons, Undetermined Deaths, and Open Sexual Assault cases (within statutory limitations)
- This establishes a starting point for selling or defending the need for a Cold Case Unit to decision makers – obtaining the political will

# Challenges

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Simply put there are two (2) hurdles to overcome...

- (Philosophical) A person that went missing or was murdered many years ago is no less important than the one that goes missing or is murdered today – the victim, the family, and our communities deserve resolve.
- (Technical) How do we justify manpower and resources dedicated to this subfield of law enforcement.

# Ancillary Functions

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## Supporting Department Operations Adds Value

- Complex Death Investigations
- Forensic (body) Recovery Methods
- Search for Missing Persons where there is a likelihood the missing is deceased

Forensic Services Unit or Special Investigations Unit or  
Major Case Unit

# Agency Size

This is usually viewed as the number of agency personnel, but can also be viewed as the number of citizens the agency serves (primary vs. secondary jurisdiction)

- **Small** – less than a dozen incidents that fit the definition of cold case in this series
- **Large** – major city, county, and state police departments that have thousands of these types of cases
- **Medium** – agencies that fall in between small and large



# 1.) Get Organized

- Note : “Cold Case Solvability Matrix”**  
will be the focus of future trainings

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# Forming A Cold Case Unit

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## 2.) Be Prepared for a Commitment

- Long-term endeavor
- Cold case investigations must be given the time they deserve
- Locating records, evidence, witnesses, and suspects takes time. Travel may be necessary.
- Conducting backgrounds and evidence testing can be tedious



# Forming A Cold Case Unit

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## 3.) Dedicated Staff

- Tasking unit members with investigations or duties unrelated to the cold case mission sets the unit up for failure
- Unnecessary reassignment will cause additional delays and loss of focus



# Forming A Cold Case Unit

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## 4.) Skill Set, Experience, and Motivation

- Unit members must have a mix of experience and skill levels
- Not a punishment unit and not a retirement unit
- Motivated investigators that have displayed interest in long term, advanced investigations

Staff the unit with a dedicated crime analyst. Database style searching, analytics, statistical reporting, and case management are keys to success.

# Forming A Cold Case Unit

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## 4.) Skill Set, Experience, and Motivation

### Form a Team

- Bring an experienced Evidence Technician into case reviews – they have invaluable experience and can identify clues and/or errors
- Identify experts that can further your cases (e.g., Forensic Archaeology Team)

**Note:** “*Using Science in Investigations*” will be the focus of a future Cold Case webinar in 2019



# Forming A Cold Case Unit

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## 5.) Units Fit Agency Size

- Large agencies have the resources to staff separate, fulltime units dedicated to unsolved murders, long-term missing/unidentified persons, complex/undetermined deaths, and open sexual assault cases.
- Medium agencies are better served with a Forensic Services style unit as defined in this series

# Forming A Cold Case Unit

## 5.) Units Fit Agency Size

- Small agencies should consider utilizing their homicide task forces in between call outs or consider consolidating under a larger agency with jurisdiction (e.g., county sheriff, state police, regional taskforce)
- Small agencies should also consider utilizing the services of a consultant for case reviews (e.g., active or retired law enforcement officer with demonstratable experience)



# Forming A Cold Case Unit

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- 1.) Get Organized
- 2.) Be Prepared for a Commitment
- 3.) Dedicated Staff
- 4.) Skill Set, Experience, and Motivation
- 5.) Units Fit Agency Size

Refer to 5 Things document on Forming a Cold Case Unit  
and Unit Expectations

# Unit Expectations

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Cold Case Unit success should not be determined through arrests and prosecutions only

Unit success must be viewed by items completed, families helped, and dignity restored

Unit Goal – Bringing the cases to a Contemporary Status

# Contemporary Status

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- This basically means that all conventional investigative methods have been completed and all contemporary investigative methods have been applied.
- Even if the cases are not immediately solved they are viable - they have a chance at closure – due, in part to, all information and evidence being placed in environments where they will continually be compared to other data and other evidence that may further the case.

# Contemporary Status

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The alternative is to continue to allow these cases to fade away as they collect dust on a shelf where they suffer “a second death”.



# Pitfalls and Pinnacles

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- Failure to identify unit members that have the proper skill set and experience to contribute to these types of cases – working cold cases requires a knowledge base that is a little different than other investigations
- Avoid distractions due to reassignment to other incidents – unit supervisor and analyst should keep track of incidents and man hours that keep unit members away from cold cases

# Pitfalls and Pinnacles

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- Continually monitor databases and scientific testing for new leads, failure to do so is contrary to the idea of bringing cases to a “contemporary status”
- Egos – most investigators have something to offer – do not hesitate to request assistance from outside agencies and organizations



# Questions?

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