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# NEWS RELEASE

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## **Hurricane Katrina Identification Efforts Transition to Coroners**

*Local law enforcement agencies to continue investigating missing person cases*

**Baton Rouge** – Officials with the Louisiana State Police and the Department of Health and Hospitals announce today that DNA identification efforts will continue with responsibility for any new cases shifting to local coroners' offices.

Last December, the two agencies began supplementing traditional identification efforts with DNA technology. Since then, nearly 98 percent of the human remains (887 out of 910) examined at the temporary morgues in St. Gabriel and Carville have been identified.

According to Dr. Louis Cataldie, acting State Medical Examiner, funding provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency allowed DHH and State Police to identify most of the human remains, for many of whom traditional identification methods were inadequate.

"This project, under the management of the State Police and the contractor, Sozer, Niezgod and Associates, has been very successful," Cataldie said. "The use of DNA technology has been essential in identification of more than 150 individuals. We are extremely grateful for the level of expertise and professionalism Dr. Sozer brought to this project. Her knowledge and approach to this effort have been invaluable."

Cataldie said 24 of the original 910 cases that were reported to the temporary morgues remain unidentified. DHH and State Police will continue actively working those cases with DNA analysis and kinship comparisons and are assisting the New Orleans Coroner, Dr. Frank Minyard, with 20 cases that came in after the morgue closed. The Orleans coroner will be responsible for identifying any new cases that may come in now.

"Along with the Louisiana State Police, we are committed to the successful conclusion of this project and will devote the resources necessary to see it through," Cataldie said. "Because we do not have any solids leads as to their identity, several of these remaining cases are the most difficult cases to identify."

For this work, investigators begin with the people who have reported a loved one as missing. People making these reports are encouraged to provide a saliva sample from which DNA is extracted. That DNA is then compared to the DNA taken from the unknown victims by genetics experts. Their goal is to compare samples, looking for similarities. When similar DNA is found, the genetic counselors then seek out other biological relatives from whom they get additional samples.

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## **DNA Identification**

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“The process is labor-intensive and time-consuming,” Cataldie said. “Also, it must be done by professionals who not only have expertise in genetics but who are skilled at working with families that are in crisis. More often than not, families are under the impression that DNA matches can be made quickly and easily when this is not the case.”

If additional human remains are discovered, local coroners will be responsible for following their usual procedures for identification. The Crime Lab is available for local coroners to use as a resource for DNA identification, and local coroners can collect bone samples from unidentified victims and send them to the State Police. As always, there is no charge to the families for processing DNA evidence to assist with identifications.

DHH will continue to use geneticists and other DNA experts to analyze the DNA results and provide telephone support for families. A representative will remain on staff at the Family Assistance Center to counsel family members who have already given a DNA sample to help them stay informed of the process.

These experts also work with families of the missing to collect complete and accurate family histories/family trees to seek out family members who would be most appropriate to give DNA samples for comparison. It is only by comparing the victims’ DNA to that from a blood relative that a match might be made.

In addition to transitioning DNA identification to local coroners, DHH and State Police are turning over to local law enforcement agencies case files of 141 people who were reported missing after the hurricane.

“For these cases, we have combed through multiple databases, sent local and state level search teams to their last known addresses, conducted several searches through State Police and have arranged for a cadaver dog search of their homes,” Cataldie said. “Unfortunately, these people have not been found. We are handing these cases over to local law enforcement to remain active as missing persons cases. We know it is possible that some of them may never be found, but if leads turn up, we want to make sure they will be followed.”

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