

CRIME

Missing In Harris County Day Is a Way For Relatives to Help Identify Family Members' Remains

PETE VONDER HAAR | APRIL 25, 2019 4:00AM



Family members of missing persons can submit DNA to help find their loved ones. *Photo by Texas Center for the Missing*

Last year, 40,175 children were reported missing in Texas (over 9,600 of these from the Greater Houston area). And while many of these cases ended up solved, as of December 31, 8,360 missing persons cases (children and adult) remain open in the state. Hoping to bring these numbers down, **Texas Center for the Missing (TCM)** — in conjunction with the **Harris County Sheriff's Office**, **Houston Police Department**, and the **South Texas Human Rights Center**, among others — is hosting Missing in Harris County Day this Saturday, April 27.

According to TCM Chief Executive Officer Beth Alberts, **Missing in Harris County Day** was started in 2015 by Dr. Sharon Derrick, then a Forensic Anthropologist with the **Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences**. Alberts said Derrick wanted to replicate a similar event held in New York that was able to successfully match DNA from family cheek swabs taken at the event to unidentified remains in morgues and graves around the country.

In Missing in Harris County Day's four-year history, it has solved 13 cold missing persons cases, the oldest of which was over 20 years old.

When asked about what happens at the event, Alberts said, "Families will arrive on Saturday and complete a missing person report (if they have not already done so) giving law enforcement detailed physical description of the person, the time/date/location and clothing description when last seen. That information will be entered into the appropriate agency's database and uploaded to the National Crime Information Center database. DNA collected that day will be cross-referencing with existing DNA in national databases."

If you're searching for a missing person, TCM encourages you to bring the following:

- Your photo ID
- Photos of the missing person, preferably with identifying features (tattoos, birthmarks) or personal items, like favorite earrings
- Two of the missing person's closely related family members from the mother's side for the voluntary submission of DNA
- X-rays, dental or medical records, police reports or other identifying documents that can be scanned and placed on file

Alberts said photographs and official records are especially important: "Dental records, description of tattoos and piercings, medical records (along with x-rays of broken bones or prosthetics) clothing descriptions, vehicle descriptions, etc., are crucial to helping identify missing persons."

Attendees can also download and complete the Missing Person Comprehensive Case Form to bring with them. This will save time by ensuring all partners have the correct information.

Family members are usually the ones to submit reports, "Because theirs are generally the most accurate and most reliable," Alberts said. "However, in the case of no living relatives, law enforcement may, at their discretion, take a report from a friend or acquaintance."

When asked if the number of law enforcement organizations in attendance meant coordination among them was getting better, Alberts responded, "Yes. Coordination among LE agencies has improved dramatically during the last decade or so, and given the size of the Houston Metro Area, the area's agencies truly do try hard to communicate and coordinate as much as possible. Having said that, these types of events are still incredibly helpful and effective!"

Missing in Harris County Day is this Saturday, April 27, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Children's Assessment Center, 2500 Bolsover.

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PETER VONDER HAAR writes movie reviews for the *Houston Press* and the occasional book. The first three novels in the "Clarke & Clarke Mysteries" - *Lucky Town*, *Point Blank*, and *Empty Sky* - are out now.

CONTACT: Pete Vonder Haar **FOLLOW:** Twitter: @PeterVonderHaar

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