

5 THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT FORMING A COLD CASE UNIT AND UNIT EXPECTATIONS

Cold cases are defined as unsolved murders, long-term missing persons/unidentified persons, undetermined deaths, and open sexual assault cases. This definition is outlined in the first of the cold case series, *What is a Cold Case and How are They Solved*. When viewed from this perspective, forming a Cold Case Unit becomes more plausible and easier to defend from a budgetary standpoint. Additional functions or roles can be added to enhance the unit's mission. These could be complex death investigations, forensic (body) recovery methods, and search for missing persons where there is a likelihood that the missing is deceased. The unit grows beyond a Cold Case Unit into a Forensic Services Unit, a Special Investigations Unit, or a Major Case Unit when the unit is working on the correct cases and is combined with investigative subcategories. This unit title shift often garners more support from decision makers.

When forming a Cold Case Unit, it is important to consider the law enforcement agency size. This is usually understood as the number of agency personnel, but it can also be the number of citizens the agency serves considering primary and secondary jurisdictions. For simplicity, this article will use small, medium, and large to describe agency size. Small agencies are those that have less than a dozen incidents that fit the definition of cold case in this series. Large are major city, county, or state police departments that have thousands of these types of cases. Medium agencies fall in between the small and large agencies.

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GET ORGANIZED

Establish your agency's need by forming a comprehensive list of open cold cases. Decision makers need to visualize the problem. Seeing a list of open murders, long-term missing/unidentified person cases, undetermined deaths, and criminal sexual assaults creates a picture. Depending on an agency's size and case management skills this could be time consuming.

2

BE PREPARED FOR A COMMITMENT

A Cold Case Unit, regardless of name, is a long-term endeavor. It is critical that decision makers and unit members understand this commitment. To be effective, cold case investigations must be given the time they deserve. Locating records, evidence, witnesses, and suspects takes time. Conducting backgrounds and evidence testing can be tedious. Travel may be necessary. Depending on the amount of cases, this may mean the unit will exist for several years or become permanent.

3

DEDICATED STAFF

A Cold Case Unit requires dedicated staff. Tasking unit members with investigations or duties unrelated to the ones defined in this series will set the unit up for failure. The assaults, robberies, and murders of today will always take precedence over a cold case. If command staff believe that Cold Case Unit members are available for assignment to a current incident or other cases, the unit members will be pulled away from their assigned duties. The reassignment will cause additional delays and loss of focus on the cold cases.

4

SKILL SET, EXPERIENCE, AND MOTIVATION

Cold Case Unit members must have a mix of experience and skill levels. Decision makers should never force an investigator into this type of unit. Nor should the unit be filled with only members near retirement. The unit should be staffed with motivated investigators that have displayed interest in long-term, advanced investigations. In addition to experienced and motivated investigators, consider assigning a dedicated crime analyst to the team. Database style searching, analytics, statistical reporting, and case management are keys to success.

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 size agencies are better served by a Forensic Services style unit as defined in this article. Small agencies should consider utilizing their homicide task forces to investigate these types of cases. In-between murder cases, a portion of the taskforce could be activated to work on a cold case. Small agencies should also consider utilizing the services of a consultant. As an example, an active or retired law enforcement officer with demonstrable experience.

Unit Expectations: Decision makers and unit members must not determine the unit's success through arrests and prosecutions only. Very few cold cases go to trial. Unit success must be viewed by items completed, families helped, and dignity restored. Success may be tracked through closing unsolved murders exceptionally or through reclassification, locating missing persons alive or deceased, identifying John/Jane Does, and establishing cause and manner of death. Bringing cases defined in this series to a "contemporary status" must be the goal. In short, this means that all conventional investigative methods have been completed and all contemporary investigative methods have been applied. Bringing cases to a contemporary status will provide the best opportunity for closure now and in the future.