



SOUTH TEXAS HUMAN RIGHTS CENTER
117 E. Miller
Falfurrias, Texas 78355
361-325-2555 (phone) 361-325-2363 (fax)

September 28, 2015

ATTN: Texas Forensic Science Commission

Dear Commission Members:

We thank you for the opportunity to present to you our experiences working with deceased unidentified migrant border crossers while in Falfurrias, TX, what is essentially ground zero of this crisis. Since 2013, the South Texas Human Rights Center (STHRC) has collaborated with the Brooks County Sheriff's Office (BCSO) in establishing best practice for the processing and analysis of unidentified human remains. From approximately 2006 until September of 2013, the unidentified human remains were sent to a mortuary in Mission, Texas and no records exist of DNA sampling from these remains. The STHRC and BCSO presented this information to Brooks County Commissioners in August 2013 and established a Best Practice by contracting the Medical Examiner Office in Laredo, Texas to process, analyze, and submit DNA samples to UNT for all unidentified human remains recovered in Brooks County.

Protecting Human Rights and Dignity

We have the following issues and concerns regarding next steps:

1. Family Reference Samples: Securing family reference DNA samples from undocumented family members in the United States for potential one-to-one comparisons is problematic. Reference samples from families in foreign countries can become a Best Practice if taken from the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team led by Mercedes Doretti. The STHRC would like to take lead with the Consulates and/or Medical Examiners and with UNT in establishing the Best Practices in retrieving family reference DNA samples. Alternatives to having law enforcement taking DNA samples need to be considered and can possibly involve vetted and accredited forensic anthropologists.

2. DNA Profile Policies: What is the policy regarding unidentified DNA profiles from UNT? Who can these DNA profiles be shared with? Can the Justice of the Peace who has original jurisdictional authority request an additional DNA sample be submitted to an independent laboratory?

3. Status of Exhumed Remains: The biggest concern that the STHRC has is regarding unidentified human remains exhumed from Sacred Heart Cemetery in Falfurrias, Texas. Efforts are in effect to clean, process, analyze, and submit DNA to UNT for all the exhumed remains taken and collected from Brooks County. The humanitarian efforts of Dr. Lori Baker of Baylor University, Dr. Kate Spradley of Texas State University and Dr. Krista Latham of University of Indianapolis have been excellent. However, many remains have yet to be analyzed, meaning that no DNA samples have been sent to UNT for these cases, leaving the identification process on hold for many families. The remains have been out of the ground long enough! This is an urgent issue. While it is not a problem that UNT created, it is a project that UNT has resources to address.

Sincerely,
Eduardo Canales
Director, South Texas Human Rights Center

