

- Inform victims in a timely manner about the progress of the case to avoid the possibility that they might hear about the case through the media or other sources.
- Be prepared to give the victim information (verbally and in writing, if possible) about the criminal justice process, the use of DNA to solve cold cases, and what may be expected of him or her during the process.
- Let victims know that a decision may be made to not prosecute the offender or that a plea bargain may be accepted. Victims should be notified of this decision in a timely manner and be given the opportunity to voice concerns to the investigator or prosecutor.
- Provide referrals to agencies that can support the victim during the entire criminal justice process.

Law enforcement officers who notify victims about DNA hits in cold cases have a unique opportunity to provide support and information to victims, which may, in turn, encourage victims to participate fully in the criminal justice process. Victims who are kept well-informed and treated with respect are more likely to trust criminal justice professionals as they bring offenders to justice. Ultimately, the criminal justice system is better served when victims are informed and willing participants.



*Helping Victims of Crime Rebuild Their Lives*

## NATIONAL CRIME VICTIM HELPLINE

**1-800-FYI-CALL**

TTY: 1-800-211-7996

gethelp@ncvc.org

Monday - Friday

8:30 a.m. - 8:30 p.m. ET

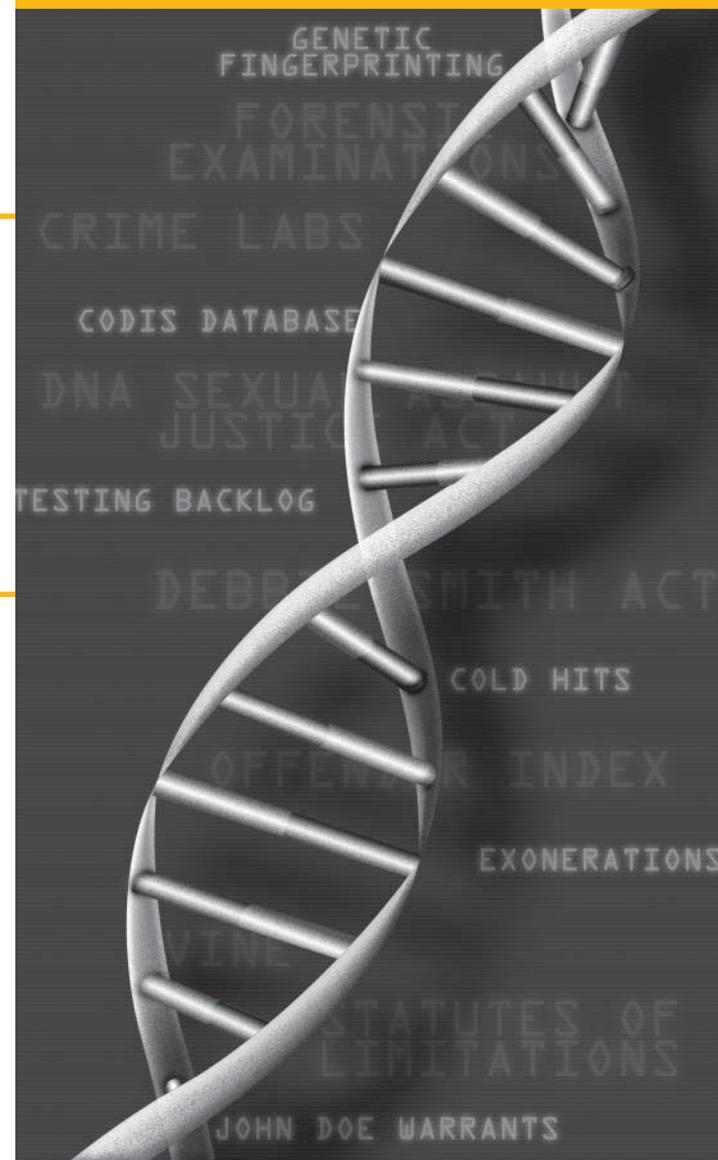
**www.ncvc.org**

National Center for Victims of Crime  
2000 M Street, NW, Suite 480  
Washington, DC 20036

**p.** 202-467-8700

**f.** 202-467-8701

# DNA HITS IN COLD CASES: NOTIFYING CRIME VICTIMS



materials that further the understanding of how DNA technology is used to assist criminal investigations.

This brochure was made possible by an unrestricted educational grant from Applied Biosystems, Inc. Applied Biosystems is committed to providing educational

03/08-AM

THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR  
**Victims of Crime**

# DNA HITS IN COLD CASES: Notifying Crime Victims

**D**NA technology offers great hope for solving cold cases. When a DNA sample from a victim or crime scene is matched to DNA from a previously unsuspected individual, law enforcement may suddenly have the evidence to bring charges against an offender and close an old case.

While DNA technology clearly benefits the criminal justice process, crime victims or surviving family members may experience mixed reactions to the news of reopening the investigation.\* Law enforcement officers, who are generally responsible for notifying victims in these cases, play a unique role in helping victims reengage with the criminal justice system and ensuring that victims' concerns are addressed. Remember, the outcome of a case can ultimately depend on an officer's relationship with the victim.

## Victim Responses to Cold Case Hits

Some victims, of course, will be pleased to learn that a cold "hit"—or DNA match—might help close their case. They will want to know how the DNA evidence was found and what law enforcement officers and prosecutors will do with that evidence. These victims will make themselves readily available and will have few conflicts about reopening the investigation.

For other victims, the news may be traumatic. Reinvestigating a case that has turned cold may trigger intense anxiety, and painful emotions associated with the crime may resurface. Approaching victims with sensitivity and patience can help them cope with the

shock of hearing about renewed activity on their case.

Most victims will need time to fully comprehend what reopening the criminal investigation means for their lives now. The experience of victimization is seldom forgotten, yet most crime victims will have carried on with their lives. Reengaging in the criminal justice process may upset the careful balance a victim has created since the crime occurred. Police officers will benefit from being prepared for widely diverse reactions from victims.

Victims in cold cases with new activity may:

- re-experience many of the same emotions that occurred at the time of the crime;
- be angry or feel as if they are being unjustly burdened;
- feel numb, overwhelmed, or as if they are in shock;
- suffer anxiety, fear, grief, and powerlessness;
- feel as though their world is coming apart again; and
- have these feelings throughout the course of the reopened case.

At the same time, many victims are glad to hear that a suspect has been identified and that justice may finally prevail. They may feel safe for the first time since the crime.

## Working with a Victim Advocate

It may be helpful for an officer who is notifying a victim about a DNA match in a cold case to work in tandem with a crime victim advocate. A victim advocate can:

- provide crisis intervention and advocacy,
- give information on local sources of victim assistance,
- provide information on the criminal justice system

and forensic DNA,

- help victims handle media attention, and
- work to ensure that victims are afforded their rights throughout the charging and prosecution processes.

## Contacting Victims in Cold Cases Involving DNA Hits

Law enforcement officers can help make the first contact with victims go as smoothly as possible by keeping the following suggestions in mind:

- Consider a victim's current life circumstances when determining the most appropriate setting for the first contact. Privacy may be an important factor, especially if the victimization occurred under circumstances that may now be embarrassing or otherwise uncomfortable to the victim.
- Arrange to meet the victim in person to best gauge his or her reaction and respond to concerns.
- Involve the victim advocate who originally worked with the victim when making the initial contact, if possible.
- Be prepared to talk about a victim's safety. Even if no obvious threats to a victim's personal safety exist, many victims' own sense of safety and well-being will become unsettled when they learn the investigation is resuming.
- In cases where a victim has moved out of the area and contact must be made by phone, it may be helpful to contact a local victim advocate in the victim's current location who can offer direct assistance. For referrals to local resources throughout the country, contact the **National Crime Victim Helpline** at **1-800-FYI-CALL**.

\*In this brochure, "victims" may refer to direct victims or surviving family members, as in the case of homicide.