

The Unclaimed Dead

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Tiffany's parents had no choice but to tell her.

One day after school, when Tiffany¹ was 13, her mom walked into her room. Tiffany had been asking relatives why she didn't look like her dad.

Her mother finally explained: Tiffany was 2 years old the last time she saw her biological father. That's when her parents split up. Her mother remarried, and her new husband adopted Tiffany as his own.

After she finished, her mother left the room and the man Tiffany had always known as Dad came in.

"There was so much sadness between us," Tiffany says. "I wished desperately to be his, and he felt the same. We now had something separating us and it hurt — a lot. Dad told me he loved me and that it didn't matter. We never spoke about this subject again."

But knowing about her past made Tiffany see her life more clearly. Her biological father was Black, so that's why she sensed an attachment to Black culture. That's why she didn't have some of the Hispanic features her adopted dad did. Tiffany wanted to know more.

It was the early 90s, so she took to the internet and began a lifelong search for her biological father.

What Tiffany didn't know was that for much of her search, her father would sit on a funeral home shelf in Washington, waiting for the day when someone would claim his remains.

Coast to Coast: The Number of Unclaimed Bodies is Rising

Tiffany's father is just one example of the thousands of people unclaimed by next of kin. Their remains crowd coroner's offices and pile up in the corners of funeral homes. As municipalities across the U.S. report an increase in unclaimed, they face dwindling funds to bury, cremate, and store the dead.

People's remains get caught in a state of limbo with no one to claim them and nowhere to go.

States, counties, and cities determine their fate. These local laws govern how much time to devote to finding next of kin, how long bodies must be stored, whether they're buried or cremated, where the remains go, and where the funds come from to make it all happen.

This also makes it hard to measure the exact number of unclaimed across the country. There are 3,141 counties, boroughs, parishes, and other county-equivalents in the U.S., and each of them has the option to input the names of their unclaimed into a federal database called NamUs. Right now, it lists more than 6,200 names and counting. But because reporting is voluntary, most counties don't contribute, even though they already pay for the database through taxes. Even participating counties don't necessarily add all of their unclaimed.

That means the more than 6,200 unclaimed bodies is an undercount. It is likely thousands more.

Look to the individual stories.

The Missing in America Project, a nonprofit that locates and interments unclaimed veterans, has found nearly 20,000 cremains, some of whom are unidentified.

Seattle's King County laid 137 unclaimed people to rest in 2014. Two years later, that number more than doubled to 278.

In Buncombe County, which covers Asheville, North Carolina, there was a 48 percent increase in unclaimed from 2015 to 2016.

Boise, Idaho's Ada County had seven unclaimed bodies in 2011. Last year, it tripled to 21.

In Bibb County in Macon, Georgia, each unclaimed body costs \$100 per day just for storage. The chief coroner had to get a budget increase of \$65,000 approved in May because the number of unclaimed bodies keeps going up.

Only two of these four counties list their unclaimed on NamUs.

Normally, an article like this focuses on one location to tell a story about a trend at large. We didn't do that here. Each municipality operates under different laws regarding unclaimed. Some have no laws at all. That means there is no standard way in which cities or counties deal with unclaimed. So we're highlighting the stories of a variety of locations to show how this issue manifests itself in every corner of the country.

Chatham County: When You Run Out of Space

In Chatham County, Georgia, there are more than 250 people's remains sitting in the

coroner's office, waiting for who knows what.

Chatham, which covers the city of Savannah, houses their cremains in white boxes. They're stacked in a 10×10 storage closet with a window letting light peek in. The closet stands next to county coroner Bill Wessinger's desk.

"It just keeps going up," he says, adding that as Savannah's population grows, so does the number of people in his office.

Unclaimed used to get buried at the Stranger Ground, a designated 60-acre area in Laurel Grove Cemetery marked off by a lone wooden cross. Chatham buried people there from the 19th century until the 1990s when it ran out of space — at approximately 4,600 bodies. Unclaimed people have gone to the coroner's office ever since.

In 2018, the Chatham County manager publicly suggested using 1 to 2 acres that the county owns in order to bury everyone. So far, that hasn't happened.

"It's become more stressful to try to find a suitable, appropriate means of disposition, whether it be a grave or a cremation," Wessinger says. "We're looking for means of reducing that population in our office, but treat the bodies with appropriate respect."

Arkansas: When Coroners Go to the Capitol

The Arkansas State Capitol in Little Rock is a neoclassical, white limestone building that took 15 years to complete. Its grounds include memorials — to Confederate soldiers, law enforcement officers, firefighters.

In the chambers of this very building, legislation passed concerning people who seldom get memorials: the unclaimed.

As their numbers increased across Arkansas, they led to financial handwringing.

"When we started seeing this rise, we began looking at a lot of the laws that were in place," says Kevin Cleghorn, president of the Arkansas Coroners Association. "There was a lot of antiquated laws that did not really apply anymore to where we are in our state now."

Arkansas' original law set no definition for "next of kin," which meant the search process continued until a court said every possible relative had been contacted. Sometimes, coroners had to hold a person's body in a cooler for weeks or even months. The law also gave coroners limited options for what to do with unclaimed bodies.

For example, Arkansas has several medical and osteopathic schools with anatomical gift programs that take unclaimed bodies. The previous law listed only one of them as an option to donate. (Cleghorn says that even then, the one legal option didn't accept unclaimed.)

Cleghorn and the other coroners around the state were left to interpret what proper due diligence was and how long to look for someone to claim a body.

It was unsustainable.

The Arkansas Coroners Association worked on a bill for two years to clarify the search for next of kin, as well as expand the options for disposition.

Last April, the bill became law. It defines "next of kin" and sets a five-day limit on the search. If a relative doesn't claim the body, it can be claimed by a friend, representative of a fraternal society, a veteran's organization, or a charitable or religious group.

"Is this going to solve all of the problems? Probably not. It doesn't happen overnight," Cleghorn says. "But it is a large step forward in helping our counties and making the counties better in dealing with this situation. It kind of lays out the guidelines of what should happen."

Tiffany's Story: Adoption Day

When Tiffany was 4 years old at the beginning of the 1990s, her family dressed her up for a big celebration. Adoption day had arrived.

Tiffany's mother and biological father had split up two years earlier. As Tiffany's mother tells it, he wasn't in a place to take care of a child. "We never saw him again," Tiffany says. "He just kind of disappeared."

A few months later, her mother fell in love and remarried. She and her new husband waited a couple of years to make the adoption official. The lawyer needed enough time to prove that Tiffany's biological father no longer had parental rights.

Before leaving for the courthouse, Tiffany's adopted dad took her aside to explain what was happening. They would go to the courthouse, sign all the papers, and celebrate their family of three. He told her how much he loved her.

That's all Tiffany remembers of adoption day.

"Looking back, I do remember a day where I was very dressed up and my father got down to my eye level and was talking to me about something serious," she says. "I only recall thinking about how red and shiny his eyes were, but not understanding what he was talking about."

Her parents didn't want to bring up the adoption again. They didn't want Tiffany to feel different from her sister, and Tiffany grew up only ever knowing her adopted father as "dad." He was happy, energetic, and he loved her.

Still, something tugged at Tiffany.

West Virginia: When A State Cuts Costs

West Virginia couldn't afford the funerals anymore.

Unlike many states, it has a statewide indigent burial program for unclaimed people as well as those who can't afford a funeral. The state used to pay funeral homes \$1,250 per person, but as indigent deaths rose, the burial program dried up.

With the opioid crisis exacerbating the problem, the annual \$2 million fund was running out earlier and earlier, says Rob Kimes, executive director of the West Virginia Funeral Directors Association.

So in 2018, West Virginia cut the amount paid to \$1,000 and tightened the vetting process for those in need. Kimes says the updated process cut down on surrounding states sometimes tapping into the program for people living on the border of West Virginia who could not afford a funeral.

Still \$1,000 isn't enough to cover a cremation, even without a ceremony, says Alan Norton, funeral director at Eackles-Spencer & Norton Funeral Home in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. Cremations require workers, a vehicle, and other overhead. Without a ceremony and viewing, the median cost of cremation for consumers was \$5,025 in 2017, five times what West Virginia provides.

"The cap is low, and it isn't enough," Norton says. "I can't totally blame the state for not allocating more funds. I'm not totally sure that the funds are really there to allocate without taking it away from some places where living citizens might suffer more."

The legislative changes worked. West Virginia's fiscal year ended June 30, and the indigent burial program still had money left in it. Meanwhile, funeral homes cover the losses.

In short, they end up providing a public service.

"Indigent has never made a funeral home wealthy. It's lucky if it breaks even," Kimes says. "More often than not, it was more of a community service."

Still, relying on funeral homes to donate services isn't feasible for every municipality. At the end of the day, funeral homes and most cemeteries are businesses with expenses and

employees. The people transporting bodies and doing cremations and burying remains need to live.

Detroit, Michigan: When Volunteers Save The Day (And Cover For The State)

Five years ago, David Techner was watching the 11 o'clock news at his Detroit home when he saw a distressing [report](#).

Nearly 200 bodies in a freezer were going unclaimed in Wayne County, Michigan. State law prohibited cremations without the permission of next of kin.

After the newscast ended, Techner's phone rang. On the line was his friend Mark Davidoff. Davidoff was a past leader of Michigan grantmaking organization the Jewish Fund. He had watched the same newscast and said the Jewish Fund wanted to make sure those 200-odd people got the respect they deserved. The fund had the finances to do it, and Davidoff thought Techner, the funeral director at Ira Kaufman Chapel, could help make arrangements.

"We want to make a statement here that this is unacceptable," Davidoff told Techner.

That started the phone calls. Techner rang his friend John Desmond. Desmond, of A.J. Desmond & Sons funeral home, rang the Catholic archdiocese of Detroit.

The archbishop approved creating a space in Our Lady of Hope, a Catholic cemetery, for unclaimed. The Jewish Fund and the Matthews Casket Division provided the caskets.

In the end, the coalition buried all the unclaimed dead from the report. Nearly 150 people — some relatives, some strangers — attended the community service. People heard scripture, songs, and prayers as they sent off the deceased.

One woman paid her respects to her brother Edward Duminskie. She had searched for him for decades.

"It just feels good to know that somebody found him somewhere, that he wasn't just abandoned," the sister told [local news outlet MLive](#) at the service.

A coalition of funeral homes continues to volunteer to cremate the unclaimed in Wayne County's morgue. Techner says volunteers come from as far away as 100 miles.

"We're just volunteering our time to put some dignity to the end of this person's life."

Los Angeles, California: When It's A Yearly Tradition

On the first Wednesday of December 2018, about 200 people assembled on a stormy morning in Los Angeles to pay their respects. It was around the 120th time this happened.

Los Angeles County holds an annual interfaith service and burial for its unclaimed.

At the last ceremony, there were 1,457 unclaimed people, all buried in a single grave. The county holds cremains for three years to make sure no one comes forward to claim them, so this group dated from 2015, says Brian Elias, chief of coroner investigations at the Los Angeles County Medical Examiner-Coroner Office.

The service incorporated prayers in English, Korean, Spanish, and Fijian. People read Muslim and Jewish texts, and a woman sang a Native American hymn.

One mourner, Susan Rorke, told the Los Angeles Times through tears that she thinks she will also end up alone and in a mass grave.

"I'm glad that the county does something," Rorke said. "These were human beings that mattered."

Los Angeles County's service for unclaimed is among the most well-known, but it isn't the only one. Since 2012, the Lafayette Parish Coroner's Office in Louisiana has partnered with local Catholic organizations to hold a mass for the unclaimed. Bernalillo County, the most populous county in New Mexico, has an annual ceremony to bury 80 to 100 unclaimed and indigent people every year.

Tiffany's Story: Stuck in Limbo

Between the intervening years and the fact that her adoption was never discussed, Tiffany forgot it even happened. As she grew older, she questioned why she didn't have some of the same features as her dad or his family. She wondered why she felt a strong connection to Black history and culture, even though her mother was white and her dad Mexican-American. When Tiffany posed questions to extended family, she mostly received nudges to ask her parents.

It all led to that life-altering conversation with her parents in her childhood bedroom about her family history — and Tiffany's quest for information.

Tiffany always felt fulfilled with her adopted dad. But that didn't stop her from wanting to know her biological father and his family. Tiffany also felt that her father, a Black man, could be a cultural connection.

“There was this whole cultural identity that I was missing, and so I was always kind of searching and hoping to link up with my family and my culture,” she says. “I felt cheated that there was a man, who my mother said had loved me, looked like me, and was my link to generations of ancestors out there, and I couldn’t find him. He was an absolute mystery to me.”

Tiffany left her teenage years behind and grew into an adult. And still, her search for her biological father continued.

“I tried to do all the research I could on my own, but all the family pictures with him have been destroyed,” she says. “I never really had anything.”

Despite years of trying, Tiffany still hadn’t found her biological father.

What It Means to Be Unclaimed

There is no single explanation for why people go unclaimed. There could be a breakdown of family ties. Sometimes, no family can be located, especially if the person doesn’t live in the same place. Something as simple as not finding family information in a person’s home or phone could lead to them being unclaimed. Sometimes, unclaimed people are immigrants. Others are elderly people who have outlived their loved ones. Homelessness is another factor.

Whatever the reason someone ends up unclaimed, their remains cast a shadow in our collective consciousness.

Living people have an aversion to the corpse, especially when it doesn’t seem to have anyone willing to fight for it.

Gary Laderman, a professor of American religious history and cultures at Emory University and author of two books on death, says people struggle with ethical, religious, social, and above all financial considerations when a body doesn’t seem to have living friends or family.

“[There’s] this feeling that you don’t really have to do anything that’s too sacred or religious when you have a body that doesn’t have any living witnesses,” Laderman says.

The label “unclaimed” also carries certain connotations that can prove difficult to shake.

Sarah Chavez serves as executive director of the Order of the Good Death, a group advocating for people to speak openly about mortality. She says people deem unclaimed deaths as less worthy than others. The result? People who are marginalized in life do not escape it in death.

“People love to pass judgment on not just life circumstances of people but deaths of others as a way to reinforce their own fear of death,” she says.

She explains that people might feel safe from death because they’ve made different choices than those who have passed.

Yet being unclaimed does not mean being unwanted.

A major reason remains end up sitting in coroner’s closets is because families can’t afford to claim them. The national median cost of a funeral with viewing and burial in 2017 was \$7,360, according to the National Funeral Directors Association. A cremation makes it \$6,260.

Real median household income in the U.S. was \$61,372, according to the latest U.S. Census Bureau numbers. So even a cremation could cost 10 percent of what a household makes for the entire year.

This can force families to choose: pay for life expenses or pay for a funeral.

But of course, that’s when families know of their loved one’s passing.

Genetic genealogist Deb Stone, who has resolved about 80 unclaimed cases in four years, says some people who go unclaimed grew up in foster care or were adopted.

“The children have grown up, and they’re detached from their family of origin and they’re not very strongly connected to their family that raised them or families,” Stone says. “They’re just kind of at loose ends in the world.”

Stone turned out to play an important role in Tiffany’s story.

Tiffany’s Story: Finally, A Breakthrough

About 16 years had passed since Tiffany found out about her biological father, and she still hadn’t found even a single photo of him. But one day in March 2016, an unexpected email made its way to Tiffany’s phone.

At first, she thought it was a scam. She didn’t know who Deb Stone was or why she was contacting her. But really, it turned out to be a breakthrough.

On the phone, Stone told Tiffany about her father: he had died in 2001. After all these years — the online searches, the questions to family, the wondering — it turned out her father died shortly after Tiffany found out he existed.

“My first thought was sadness,” Tiffany says. “He probably died alone, and no one claimed his body. I wondered if he knew that I loved him, because I did. Even as a 13-year-old girl, I loved him — this man who gave me life.”

After 15 years, her father’s ashes were still unclaimed, resting on a shelf in a white brick tower at a Washington funeral home and cemetery. Stone provided the phone number of the government office where Tiffany could call to say she was next of kin, the first step in eventually getting her father’s ashes sent to her.

Tiffany reached out to Stone to tell her what this meant to her.

“I was like, ‘Wow, thank you so much. I’m going to be able to get his ashes now. Do you realize what you just did for me? I no longer have to endlessly search every few months or every six months all the time, looking for this person,’” Tiffany says.

Finally, he would be near family.

Everybody Has Somebody

Unclaimed does not always mean that nobody cares enough to speak up for you.

Deb Stone, a genetic genealogist at Kin Forensics in Portland, Oregon, started volunteering to look for unclaimed people’s next of kin in 2014. Starting this year, she contracts with Snohomish County Medical Examiner’s Office in Washington.

She found Tiffany by locating a marriage record for her parents, seeing they had a daughter, and then finding Tiffany on social media. The process took about three weeks.

In the last four years of looking for next of kin, Stone says almost every person has been grateful for the notification even a decade after death.

“Agencies do a really good job at most of the cases, but when a case is challenging, they don’t have the staff man-hours to stay with a case over 30 days or over a period of time and really devote time to solving it,” Stone says.

Of course, that depends on the agency and who works there.

Investigator Jenni Penn has worked at the Milwaukee County Medical Examiner’s Office for 22 years. Over that time, she has helped locate next of kin for an estimated 15 unclaimed people every year.

“One of my favorite things to do in the job is finding long lost family,” Penn says. “When you find them, it’s so rewarding.”

Penn has even taught her coworkers how to find next of kin for unclaimed. If she knows someone's parents, she can look up obituaries, which typically list surviving family members. Penn uses Ancestry.com through the medical examiner's office as well as a few of her own subscriptions for obituary websites. She also looks up old newspapers.

The Milwaukee County Medical Examiner's Office has seen its unclaimed bodies increase. In 2013, the office had 16 people. In 2018, that number had almost doubled to 31.

But even if it takes months, Penn perseveres. People are often left wondering where their loved ones have gone, so some families are grateful that someone took the time to find them, she says.

"My philosophy is everybody has somebody," she says. In fact, Penn says next of kin claim someone about two-thirds of the time.

Tiffany's Story: Never Forgotten

To this day, Tiffany has still never seen a photo of her biological father. But now, she has him in her home. One day, she will tell her kids about him.

"He may have died alone, but now he's with a family that would love him," she says. "He's not alone."

Someday, Tiffany plans to release his ashes, perhaps in Washington. She figures he must have liked it since he chose to live there. "But for now, I like knowing that he's close after so many years of searching," she says.

Today, the ashes of Tiffany's father no longer sit unclaimed on a cemetery shelf far from family. They rest in a custom box with his name, birthday, and death date. On the box is a simple inscription: "Finally found but never forgotten."

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