

# Illinois Forensic Science Commission- FIGG Subcommittee

## Meeting Minutes

November 4, 2024, 12:30 p.m. meeting

- I. Call to order  
Cris Hughes, subcommittee chairperson, called the meeting to order.
- II. Roll-call  
The following people were present:
  1. Ponni Arunkumar, FS Commission Member, subcommittee member
  2. Claire Dragovich, FS Commission Member, subcommittee member
  3. Cris Hughes, FS Commission Member, subcommittee chairperson
  4. Jeanne Richeal, FS Commission Member, subcommittee member
  5. Amy Watroba, Executive Director-Forensic Science Commission
  6. Robin Woolery, Director Designee, subcommittee member
  7. Gwendowlyn Knapp, DNA Doe Project
  8. Sarah Ware, Kane County
- III. Approval of Minutes from Meeting on August 29, 2024
  1. The minutes from the August 29, 2024 meeting were unanimously approved.
- IV. Discussion Topics- Presentation from Gwendowlyn Knapp, DNA Doe Project
  1. Dr. Knapp presented to the subcommittee regarding her work with the non-profit organization DNA Doe Project (DDP), where she serves as a case manager. Dr. Knapp provided background information regarding DDP, which assists with investigative genetic genealogy (FIGG or IGG) for law enforcement agencies and medical examiners/coroners to identify unidentified human remains (UHR). DDP also works with other networks including the Doe Network. DDP was founded in 2017 to use FIGG to help identify UHR.
  2. There are approximately 50,000 UHRs nationwide and the problem is referred to as a “silent mass disaster.” Dr. Knapp indicated 16 states require submission of information into NamUs. She explained differences in what information about UHR cases is shared in different databases and how that information is used to assist with investigations. She also outlined some key events in FIGG history from 2018 to present, including the case of the “Buckskin girl,” who was found in 1981 and is believed to be the first case where FIGG was used to identify human remains.

3. Dr. Knapp discussed how changes in the databases used by law enforcement for FIGG have caused fluctuations in case outcomes. For example, she explained how all “John Doe” and “Jane Doe” cases are automatically “opted-in” to GEDmatch under the current Terms of Service, which allows the SNP profiles of unidentified remains to be continually searched.
4. Dr. Knapp explained the steps involved when DDP assists with FIGG. First, agencies make contact to request assistance from DDP. If DDP is involved with a case, they will assist with raising funds to cover lab costs the agency cannot cover. Upload fees are currently approximately \$2400. The total cost of FIGG varies depending mostly on the source and amount of sequencing done in a case. DDP conducts the investigative genetic genealogy (which includes building and analyzing family trees) free of charge to help provide an investigative lead or candidate to the law enforcement agency. Kevin Lord, Director of Lab and Agency Logistics for DDP, helps the agency determine which sample is best for testing in a particular case. Dr. Knapp noted that the law enforcement agency always retains discretion on when to release any public information or make an announcement about a case. DDP’s website has resources including maps and data related to cases solved and cases in their pipeline. Dr. Knapp explained how DDP classifies cases by difficulty and discussed types of challenges that could make a case more difficult to solve, such as record availability, large family trees, and adoptions within a family tree. Dr. Knapp also explained how the possible ethnicity of the UHR can impact the solvability or complexity of a case.
5. Ms. Watroba asked Dr. Knapp about “IMF” which Dr. Knapp explained is Intermountain Forensics in Utah. IMF’s Laboratory Operations was recently acquired by DNA Labs International.
6. Dr. Hughes asked how agencies are involved in the decision-making process of choosing a lab for SNP testing. Dr. Knapp explained that it depends on the agency and that some agencies may have preferred labs or procurement processes that impact the decision of which lab is used in a case.
7. Dr. Hughes shared that Jason Moran from the Cook County Sheriff’s Office is looking at possible modifications to Illinois’s Missing Persons Act to address the issue of whether it is mandatory in Illinois to input missing persons cases into NamUs. Dr. Hughes noted that a first line of success in identifying UHR would be getting case information into NamUs, which could possibly lead to identifications before agencies spend money on FIGG. Dr. Knapp discussed the fact that FIGG technology is not necessarily the right technology to use on

every case. Some factors that are considered include whether a case can be prosecuted and what the goal of identifying the UHR is in a case.

8. Dr. Hughes asked if DDP had certain criteria or a checklist they use when vetting a case for the use of FIGG. Dr. Knapp indicated that they take many factors into consideration, including the source of the case, whether mtDNA or STR DNA testing was completed, whether there would be a source to confirm an identification (such as with older remains), and what standard the law enforcement agency or submitting agency would take for confirmation of an identification. Dr. Knapp provided examples illustrating how determinations are very case and fact dependent. Dr. Knapp and Dr. Hughes shared challenges and resources in cases involving the remains of undocumented migrants.
9. Ms. Watroba inquired about challenges specific to the Illinois region and asked if Dr. Knapp could identify impediments or anything that would be helpful to efforts to identify UHR in Illinois, other than the need for increased financial resources. Dr. Knapp explained some challenges to building trees in the Illinois region such as historical migratory patterns, adoptions, and limits to accessing records (such as adoption records, prison records, and the destruction of 1890 census records in a fire). Dr. Knapp explained that every case is different and that understanding the family structure of a tree and trying to reconcile DNA connections in a family tree with an accessible “paper trail” is often critical. Deputy Director Woolery asked whether DDP was involved in any current legislative proposals that would help them with resources or funding and Dr. Knapp indicated that they are not.
10. Ms. Dragovich inquired about the use of FIGG by innocence projects in exoneration cases. Dr. Knapp discussed a college in New Jersey with a dedicated FIGG unit that recently worked on a case project with an innocence group that resulted in the release of two incarcerated brothers and the identification of a different suspect.
11. Dr. Hughes asked if Dr. Knapp could share any observations or insight based on her experience working with different agencies that might assist the Commission with efforts to educate agencies about FIGG and/or promote best practices. Dr. Knapp responded that educating agencies about what groups like DDP do when building trees and how the agencies will still need to be involved as facilitators or contacts for collection of family or reference samples during the FIGG process would be useful. She also indicated that educating agencies about the limitations of testing and analysis based on available samples, the fact that timelines differ from case-to-case, and the importance of trusting the process, even if it moves slower than the agency might expect,

would be beneficial. Dr. Knapp also noted that public awareness and education directed towards encouraging members of the public to upload profiles to databases would be impactful.

12. Ms. Dragovich asked if DDP works on cases of pre-1900 skeletal human remains, and Dr. Knapp responded that they do. She noted that the issue of what will be used for identification confirmation is often an issue in cases involving older remains. Dr. Hughes noted that pursuant to 2024 updates to the Illinois Human Remains Protection Act, coroners have jurisdiction over remains that are 100 years old or less, and that remains older than 100 years fall under the jurisdiction of the Department of Natural Resources.

13. Dr. Hughes asked whether, in Dr. Knapp's opinion, educational materials geared towards law enforcement agencies that could assist them with making informed decisions about lab selection (without endorsing any laboratory) such as considerations or criteria would be helpful. Dr. Knapp indicated that such educational materials would be helpful to agencies.

V. Old Business

None.

VI. New Business

The subcommittee discussed possible speakers for the next meeting. Ms. Richeal will reach out to a contact in Indiana or Michigan to see if they are available to speak in January. Dr. Hughes suggested Jason Moran as a possible future speaker related to the issue of how the Commission might provide support for coroners in the state. Once a January speaker is identified, Ms. Watroba will circulate a Doodle Poll based on the speaker's availability.

VII. Public Comment

There were no public comments.

VIII. Meeting Schedule

The next meeting will be scheduled via Doodle Poll and will be held via Web Ex.

IX. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 1:51 p.m.