

## **TANC: Rethinking Policy and Practice in Cold Case**

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### **Abstract**

The TANC organization is a new "think tank" dedicated to providing support and assistance in addressing the many issues related to the resolution of unsolved violent crimes (Figure 1). The TANC is comprised of a group of highly experienced, nationally recognized experts and investigators from a wide section of disciplines who are in a position to provide technical and legal support, develop sound recommendations, and most of all bring awareness to the thousands of unsolved violent crimes (i.e. homicide, sexual assault, and missing and unidentified persons). This group was born out of a cold case working group established by the National Institute of Justice, who recognized the need for collaboration and coordination within the medico-legal community for supporting agencies as they address policy issues pertinent to violent crime investigations.

The core of mission of TANC is the belief that all open and unresolved cases of violent crime should be investigated to the fullest extent possible, in an attempt to bring about a final, just, resolution. Quite often, long-term unresolved cases could benefit from a technical review, including the application of modern forensic and investigative methods, to bring the case to the level of contemporary standards. Sadly, that is far from reality for many reasons. We recognize there are many dedicated criminal justice professionals who work diligently to resolve cold cases. However, the problems that are encountered when dealing with cold cases are not unique and often exceed the capacity of individual investigators. These challenges are prevalent across jurisdictions. In the area of violent crimes, TANC recognized these challenges and the need to work collaboratively, share finite resources, and organize our efforts to affect violent crime investigations in a positive way. Simply put, the investigation of cold cases should not be an option or luxury. We believe that through organizing our efforts, it is possible to bring national attention to the problem of cold case, to change the current response to cold cases, to provide a venue for those dedicated professionals, and to help bring resolution to the many victims and their families.

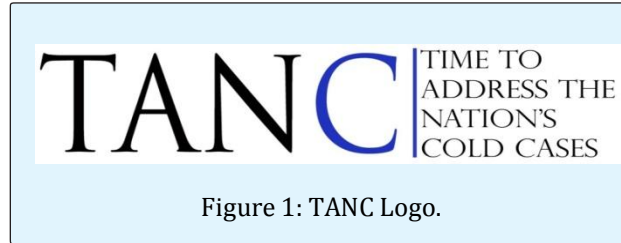


Figure 1: TANC Logo.

## Understanding the Cold Case Problem

Although there are thousands of types of unsolved cases, TANC's mission and focus is specifically to address three main categories of cases; unsolved homicide, unsolved rapes, and unsolved missing persons.

Nationwide, unresolved violent crime is a growing problem despite an overall reduction in crime, advances in technology, new forensic applications, and modern investigative strategies. While the number of open homicides is unknown, we do know that the national homicide clearance rate has fallen to its lowest levels, around 62% nationally. Some have estimated there are more than 240,000 unsolved homicides since 1980, and thousands are added to that total each year [1].

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, Sexual Assault Kit Initiative (SAKI) over 86,000 untested rape kits has been exposed resulting in a national crisis as of 2016. Once examined, it was discovered that many of the untested kits were linked to serial sex crimes and unsolved homicides. As a result, for each unsolved rape or homicide, the potential exists that the offender remains at large and will victimize again.

The medico-legal community has expressed a growing concern over the number of unidentified decedents and missing persons in the United States through federal initiatives to address the problem, fund DNA backlogs, create cold case working groups, and change state legislation (i.e. New York, Tennessee, and Pennsylvania). Each year more than 600,000 people are reported missing. While many are eventually located, over 84,000 remain entered in NCIC. Compounding the missing persons' problem is the issue of unidentified bodies, estimated at more than 40,000 decedents in the United States and often referred to as "The Nation's Silent Mass Disaster (Ritter 2007) [2]."

Consider that all of the unsolved or cold case numbers are likely under-estimated due to the fact that many cases were mishandled, closed prematurely, or victims cremated prior to the application of contemporary forensic techniques. In many instances, unidentified decedents were actually victims of homicide, yet justice

has stalled until investigative work and positive identifications are completed. Far too often, families of missing persons lack support as many of these cases are simply filed as "non-crimes" or "just a missing person."

The amount of time and resources that any agency in the medico-legal community puts into long-term missing and an unsolved case are generally voluntary in nature and varies widely across jurisdictions. Each "case" represents grieving friends and family who exist in a horrific state of uncertainty and hope, not knowing what happened to their loved one. The goal of TANC is simply to help increase the number of cases being solved through policy recommendations, legislation, public awareness, and education.

Throughout the country, there is a growing number of cold case and homicide associations, who offer expertise and assistance in the form of case reviews and technical assistance to detectives. These efforts are greatly needed but are limited. The lack of funding, resources, expertise, position papers related to policy issues, and antiquated laws continue to plague both small and large law enforcement agencies across this country. Unfortunately, there are very few organizations that are able to address the many underlying factors we face.

## TANC Goals

- Create and advocate for solutions to policy questions such as legislation in the areas of long-term unsolved "cold cases" including homicide, sexual assault, and missing and unidentified persons.
- Provide a clearinghouse of information related to the investigation and resolution of unsolved violent crimes as described above.
- Promote standards and best practices in the investigation of cold cases for investigators.
- Communicate with and survey members of the cold case community to identify gaps and needs necessary to properly investigate unresolved cases.
- Provide cold case training, consulting, technical assistance, and other resources.
- Identify resources and where/how to obtain technical assistance.

- Research how and why we are not effectively resolving more cases of violent crimes.
- Promote outreach and advocacy programs for the victims and victim's families of unsolved violent crimes.
- Collaborate with area regional cold case groups/associations to create a network for sharing information and ideas and promoting policy positions that benefit investigators and the medico-legal community working towards increased case solvability.

### Building an Ideological Framework for Cold Case

Think tanks are about expressing an educated opinion while developing innovative and creative solutions. By definition, they are about thinking *outside the box* and so it is imperative those involved in this process represent the right mix of experienced, knowledgeable, and committed individuals. A think TANC dedicated to understanding and addressing the many policy and practice issues for violent crime investigations is perhaps a departure for practitioners and investigators whose work is typically about researching facts, publishing truths, or presenting evidence and testifying in courts of law. We understand recommendations, ideas, and opinions are grounded in sound research but are also based on personal values. It is therefore important to ensure any ideological statement and strategy is the guiding doctrine for policy development. For TANC, the expected outcome is straight forward and simple, to raise public consciousness about the ever-growing problem of unsolved violent crimes against innocent people, and to provoke action towards helping the criminal justice system with finding solutions and solving these cases.

### Hot Topics in Cold Case

TANC has researched the cold case issue nationwide and identified several areas, or "hot topics" that are critical in accomplishing its mission and long-term goals. The current issues warrant position papers, additional research, and advocacy including:

- Proposed legislative changes at the State levels regarding the required use of NamUs for Missing Persons (mandate for law enforcement) and Unidentified Persons (mandate for Medical examiners/coroners).
- The need for access to Familial DNA testing at the state and federal levels.
- Proposed legislative changes to close loopholes in support of Offender DNA submissions to CODIS.

### TANC Structure, Members, and How to Get Involved

The think tank is a program of IFAAS (Institute for Forensic Anthropology & Applied Sciences) hosted at the University of South Florida in Tampa, FL. IFAAS is a Type II Research Institute in Florida, established by the Board of Governors in 2014. It is a 501-3c and has an associated USF Foundation Account for charitable contributions. The mission of IFAAS is to confront issues of missing, endangered, exploited, and unidentified persons and the need for innovative strategies for applying science and intelligence strategies to medico-legal death and violent crime investigations, typically related to homicide, human trafficking, and mass atrocities. Committed to the pursuit and promotion of equal access to justice, IFAAS provides expert technical assistance, research, and training to law enforcement and medico-legal professionals in these areas. To learn more, attend workshops and conferences, or support position papers, please visit [www.forensics.usf.edu](http://www.forensics.usf.edu) or visit the TANC blog at [coldcasetanc.blogspot.com](http://coldcasetanc.blogspot.com).

### References

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