COVER STORY

BETTER TOGETHER

BCI's holistic approach to investigating cold cases fosters collaborations across Ohio law enforcement

Apart from the heinous crimes it brings to light and the closure it brings to victims' families, BCI's Cold Case Unit is achieving another noteworthy type of success — one that directly fuels its crime-solving ability.

With each case it takes on, the Cold Case Unit is reinforcing the power of partnerships and gradually altering the way law enforcement agencies work with the Attorney General's Bureau of Criminal Investigation.

"Agencies that share their cold cases with BCI work with us as equal partners," said Special Agent-In-Charge Roger Davis, who has led the Cold Case

Anyone who's been paying attention knows the importance I put on law enforcement training. Ohioans deserve to have peace officers who are as well-prepared and well-equipped as any in the nation.

Since I became attorney general in 2019, my office has made great strides toward that goal. We've secured funding for annual continuing professional training (CPT), encouraged higher standards at Ohio's 59 basic-training academies, and developed partnerships with regional training centers across the state.

In planning for the future, we also dismantled the old curriculum at the Ohio Peace Officer Training Academy, replacing it with state-of-the-art technology, techniques and courses. The next chapter in that evolution will begin early this year, when OPOTA rolls out virtual reality (VR) training, a major step forward in simulating the split-second decisions that our officers face every day.

Make no mistake — VR is a revolutionary advance in training. Because it activates several senses at once, the technology improves a person's ability to process, distill and retain key information. For that same reason, VR also accommodates different learning styles better than traditional classroom courses.

OPOTA's training involves six virtual reality scenarios that emphasize soft skills such as conflict resolution, teamwork and communication. The scenarios were filmed using a 360-degree camera in collaboration with Ohio University's Game Research and Immersive Design Lab, one of the top 50 VR programs in the nation. Subject-matter experts, trainers and officers who routinely respond to calls depicted in the VR training were involved in the production.

The scenarios are embedded in more than two dozen courses and focus on a wide range of topics, including suicide prevention, the teen brain, mental health, domestic violence, irate families and school violence.

Tom Quinlan, OPOTA's new executive director,

AG Yost has significantly enhanced the training that Ohio's peace officers receive. The next step is statewide virtual reality training, which rolls out this year.

tells me that there's an important distinction to be made about the VR training.

Whereas traditional courses have typically used body-worn-camera footage and online videos to highlight "things gone wrong" — without showing the context that led to the bad outcome — OPOTA's virtual reality training uses a more immersive experience that controls the context and demonstrates proper approaches to common calls for service.

Immediately after the VR session, students will receive debrief worksheets designed to reinforce key points and to provoke discussion about how the scenario they just experienced applies to their agency's policies and practices.

My office is buying VR headsets for OPOTA's main academy and Tactical Training Center in London, for our six regional training centers throughout the state, and for seven larger police agencies that have their own academies. In addition, we're buying headsets to loan to agencies as needed. All told, that's 160 headsets.

Because OPOTA's VR courses will be available across the state, officers will be able to train close

to home and complete the training in less than a shift. That saves time, saves money and produces better-qualified officers.

I tried the VR technology and was surprised by my reaction. When I was done, I felt a sort of trauma response and actually teared up a bit.

This training is powerful stuff that will undoubtedly improve the ability and professionalism of our peace officers. More important, it might save their lives and the lives of the people they are sworn to protect.

I look forward to the day when all Ohio officers have this training under their belt. VR combined with instant feedback represents a new paradigm in police training that will impact officers in real time.

Yours,

Dave Yost

Dave Yost
Ohio Attorney General

BEST of the BEST

At the 2023 Law Enforcement Conference, Attorney General Yost led a celebration of the inspiring work being done by peace officers and others.

Valor Award winners Tim Goins (above) and Eric Kocheran (left) receive their awards with Attorney General Dave Yost and Fayette County Sheriff Vernon Stanforth.

LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

John Gocala Sr.
Youngstown State University Police Chief (retired); Commander and instructor at Youngstown State University Police Academy

Commander Gocala started his career in 1971 in the Youngstown Police Department's vice unit and later became police chief at Youngstown State, serving until 2012. An educator most his life, he began teaching for OPOTA in the late 1970s and has been an instructor at the YSU Police Academy since it opened in 2000.

VICTORIA ALLEN CIVILIAN LEADERSHIP AWARD

William Chattman
Senior case manager, Eastway Behavioral Health

In his ride-alongs as a part of the Montgomery County Sheriff's Office Crisis Intervention Team, Mr. Chattman connects people in crisis to treatment services in the community and provides education and support services to families learning how to manage loved ones with mental illness and addiction issues.

COMMUNITY SERVICE AWARD

Sheriff John Hinton | Morrow County Sheriff's Office
Sheriff Hinton has been a prominent advocate for mental health and addiction services. As part of those efforts, he worked with the Delaware-Morrow Mental Health and Recovery Services Board to create an app to help those in need locate services. Additionally, he has served with United Way, the Morrow County Food Pantry, and the Red Cross.

Officer Shawn Lutz | Columbus Division of Police
Officer Lutz's duties include acting as a liaison to ensure the police department works efficiently with all community partners and stakeholders, both in Linden, where he is assigned, and in Columbus' LGBTQ+ community. In that role, he helped establish the first "Dialogue Team," a unit dedicated to improving police engagement with people exercising their First Amendment rights.

MARK LOSEY SERVICE AWARD

Sgt. Lindsey Alli | Columbus Division of Police
Sgt. Alli has helped build the Columbus Division of Police youth recruiting team, which has two components: the Public Safety Corps, aimed at youths and young adults ages 14 through 20, and the Cadet Program, a three-year paid internship for adults 18 and older. She also is helping to re-establish the Columbus Police Athletic League as another important source of support for youths.

Chief Timothy Sopkovich | Brunswick Hills Police Department
Chief Sopkovich started a food pantry so residents could drop off donations to help neighbors. At Christmas and Easter, he hosts breakfasts and other family events, with proceeds from ticket sales supporting families throughout the year. And in summer, his department runs a program called Good Citation, which awards toys to kids who follow safety rules or do something nice for someone.

TRAINING AWARD

Officer Jerry Orick | Columbus Division of Police
Officer Orick has devoted much of his career to improving the skills of law enforcement. A detective assigned to the Columbus Police/ATF Crime Gun Enforcement Team, he regularly shares his knowledge of NIBIN and investigative techniques to mine data from digital media. Additionally, he was instrumental in the recent development of central Ohio's Regional Crime Gun Intelligence Center.

GROUP ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

The Central Ohio OOCIC/HIDTA Drug Task Force
The Central Ohio Organized Crime Investigations Commission/High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas Task Force focuses on dismantling drug trafficking rings. In May and December of 2022, the task force identified two operations that were flooding the region with cocaine and fentanyl from Mexico. Six people were arrested and 19 kilograms of fentanyl, 22,000 fentanyl pills and 96 kilograms of cocaine were recovered.

The Ohio Northeast Smuggling Enforcement Team (ONSET)
ONSET investigates the smuggling of narcotics and currency with a special focus on the Akron-Canton Airport, Akron Greyhound bus terminal, and local hotels. It is one of the top performing task forces in Ohio. Since its inception in 2020, ONSET has seized more than 1,000 pounds of narcotics, $4.5 million in currency, and 47 firearms. The task force also has made 53 arrests and recovered 13 stolen cars.

VALOR AWARD

Officer Tim Goins | Miami Township Police Department
On May 20, 2022, Tim Goins and other Miami Township officers found themselves crouched behind their vehicles in an apartment complex parking lot in Milford. A shirtless woman firing a pistol strode toward them, ignoring their shouts to drop her gun. About 20 minutes earlier, Goins had been called to the complex to check on the woman. When she refused assistance, Goins left. Now he was back. When the woman pointed her gun at him, he delivered six rounds, killing the woman. Miami Township Police Chief Mike Mills said Goins' bravery "undoubtedly saved lives."

Sgt. Eric Kocheran | Ross County Sheriff's Office
On Nov. 17, 2022, Sgt. Kocheran answered a knock at the back of the sheriff's office. The man first asked Kocheran to get more officers, then said somebody wanted him to hurt kids, but that he couldn't do that. He then drew a gun and shot Kocheran in the chest. Somehow, the sergeant was able to return fire, killing the gunman and ending a potential threat to Chillicothe residents. Kocheran underwent multiple surgeries and is unlikely to return to duty.

'We're not only arresting customers, we're rescuing people'

Massive collaboration fuels statewide human trafficking sting, resulting in arrest of 160 suspects and recovery of 104 victims

For six days in the fall, law enforcement officials swept across every corner of the state, urban and rural, in a coordinated crackdown on human trafficking.

Operation Buyer's Remorse, which ran from Sept. 25 through Sept. 30, marked the fourth time in four years that law enforcement agencies statewide have collaborated in a massive sting to bring traffickers and johns to justice.

This year's operation was led by eight human trafficking task forces supported by the Ohio Organized Crime Investigations Commission (OOCIC), an arm of the Ohio Attorney General's Office. The effort involved more than 70 local, state and federal law enforcement agencies as well as numerous county prosecutors, and it resulted in 160 arrests on sex, drug and weapon charges. In addition, dozens of social service agencies and victim advocacy organizations offered health care and other resources to victims.

"I am grateful for every partner who dedicated time and resources to this team effort, as we all play a key role," said Attorney General Dave Yost, who started the annual statewide crackdowns in 2020.

Operation Buyer's Remorse was designed to apprehend bad actors, yes, but it also was focused on freeing vulnerable victims.

"We're not only arresting customers, we're rescuing people out of this situation," said Belpre Police Chief Mike Stump, whose agency assisted in Operation Buyer's Remorse as part of the Southeast Ohio Human Trafficking Task Force. "Many of these people do not speak English. This puts them in bondage."

After receiving tips about a local massage business, Belpre police notified the task force. During the statewide sting, task force members executed a search warrant, taking into custody the only employee present at the time — a Chinese woman who didn't speak English.

"Once we got a translator, it became clear she didn't know where she was — even what state she was in — or what was going on," Chief Stump said. "All of which suggests she was a victim as much as anything."

The woman, who said she was earning money to support three children in Hunan, China, was released to the care of social service agencies, said task force director Lt. Spencer McPeek of the Washington County Sheriff's Office. She was not charged. The circumstances that brought her to Belpre, a small Ohio River town across from Parkersburg, W.Va., have not been determined.

Eliminating sex and labor trafficking has been a priority for AG Yost. Early in his administration, he authorized the Ohio Organized Crime Investigations Commission (OOCIC) to help form additional multi-agency task forces and strongly supported regional and statewide crackdowns.

In addition, he created the Human Trafficking Initiative (HTI), which, among many other initiatives, works to strengthen services for survivors and identify next steps for them. To that end, the social service agencies involved in Operation Buyer's Remorse provided support to 104 victims.

Human trafficking victims are vulnerable to exploitation. Perhaps they've battled drugs or been abused. Maybe they've run away from home. In desperation, they turn to someone they think they can trust and become trapped.

Victims are adults and children, male and female, of all backgrounds and races. And although headlines about human trafficking tend to predominate in urban areas, no area of the state is immune.

"This was huge news for Belpre," Chief Stump said. "We're a town of 6,500 people, and to have this kind of business set up shop was a shock to a lot of people. But it just goes to show that human trafficking can happen anywhere."

Engaging the public

In the fight against human trafficking, the eyes and ears of the public can be potent weapons.

To help educate the public about sex and labor trafficking, law enforcement agencies might consider listing the warning signs on their websites and social media platforms, along with contact information to report suspicious activity. The public also can report tips to the 24-hour National Human Trafficking Hotline (888-373-7888), which sends Ohio-related information directly to the appropriate local response network.

Information about warning signs and other aspects of human trafficking, including a growing statewide directory of available victim services, is available online at www.ohioattorneygeneral.gov/humantrafficking.

A remarkable collaboration | Nearly 100 agencies, offices, and organizations took part in Operation Buyer's Remorse. For each task force recognized below, the lead agency is listed first.

OOCIC Central Ohio Human Trafficking Task Force
Columbus Division of Police
Homeland Security Investigations
BCI
FBI
Ohio State University Police Department
Salvation Army
Southeast Healthcare

OOCIC Montgomery County Human Trafficking Task Force
Montgomery County Sheriff's Office
Butler Township Police Department
Miami Township Police Department
Homeland Security Investigations

Southern Ohio Organized and Major Crimes Task Force
Scioto County Sheriff's Office
Portsmouth Police Department
Pike County Sheriff's Office
Lawrence County Sheriff's Office
New Boston Police Department
Scioto County Prosecutor's Office
Pike County Prosecutor's Office

OOCIC Southeast Ohio Human Trafficking Task Force
Washington County Sheriff's Office
Marietta Police Department
Belpre Police Department
Marietta College Police Department
Athens Police Department
Morgan County Sheriff's Office
Noble County Sheriff's Office
Monroe County Sheriff's Office
Athens County Sheriff's Office
Meigs County Sheriff's Office
Athens County Prosecutor's Office
Rescue and Restore Coalition
Ohio State Highway Patrol
Noble County Prosecutor's Office

OOCIC Summit Regional Human Trafficking Task Force
Summit County Sheriff's Office
Medina County Prosecutor's Office
Portage County Sheriff's Office
Stark County Sheriff's Office
Akron Police Department
Stow Police Department
Springfield Township Police Department
Ohio Adult Parole Authority
Summit County Prosecutor's Office

Mahoning Valley Human Trafficking Task Force
Mahoning County Sheriff's Office
BCI
Ohio Investigative Unit
Youngstown Police Department
East Palestine Police Department
Austintown Township Police Department
Salem Police Department
Warren Police Department
Cortland Police Department
Compass Rape Crisis and Counseling Center
Beaver Township Police Department

Additional agencies
Marysville Police Department
Lancaster Police Department
Franklin County Sheriff's Office
Columbus Police PACT
Pickaway County Sheriff's Office
Licking County Sheriff's Office
Fairfield County Sheriff's Office
Madison County Sheriff's Office
New Albany Police Department
Hilliard Police Department
Grove City Police Department
Dublin Police Department
Toledo Police Department
Lorain Police Department
U.S. Marshals Service
Reynoldsburg Police Department
Ohio Department of Public Safety

OOCIC Northeast Ohio Human Trafficking Task Force
Cuyahoga County Sheriff's Office
Lake County Sheriff's Office
Ashtabula County Sheriff's Office
Geauga County Sheriff's Office
East Cleveland Police Department
MetroHealth Police Department
Cleveland Division of Police
Warrensville Heights Police Department
North Olmsted Police Department
Westlake Police Department
Ohio Investigative Unit
Homeland Security Investigations
Cuyahoga County Prosecutor's Office
Harriett Tubman Movement
Ohio ICAC
Willoughby Police Department
Lake County Prosecutor's Office
Westshore Enforcement Bureau
Ashtabula Police Department
Canopy Child Advocacy Center
Cleveland Rape Crisis Center
Conneaut Police Department
Solon Police Department

H.E.A.L. Human Trafficking Task Force
Huron County Sheriff's Office
Erie County Sheriff's Office
Ashland County Sheriff's Office
Lorain County Sheriff's Office

Bruce Pijanowski

Leadership changes mark new eras at BCI, OPOTA

The Bureau of Criminal Investigations and the Ohio Peace Officer Training Academy, both units of the Ohio Attorney General's Office, will be under new leadership in 2024.

In December, AG Yost appointed Bruce Pijanowski as BCI superintendent to replace Joe Morbitzer, who retired after five years in the top role.

Pijanowski came aboard at BCI in May 2022 as the assistant superintendent. Before that, he served 34 years with the Delaware Police Department, the last 10 as chief. Along the way, he served as detective, sergeant, detective sergeant, captain and assistant chief.

As of early January, Pijanowski's successor as assistant superintendent had not been announced.

Pijanowski is a graduate of the FBI National Academy and the Police Executive Leadership College, and has served extensively within the Ohio Association of Chiefs of Police.

At OPOTA, Yost appointed Tom Quinlan, former chief of the Columbus Division of Police, as the agency's executive director, succeeding Dwight Holcomb, who led OPOTA from 2019 until his retirement in November.

Before joining OPOTA as assistant executive director in March 2023, Quinlan spent 36 years in law enforcement, including 33 years with the Columbus police, where he served in every rank.

Quinlan has been involved in law enforcement training throughout his career — with local law enforcement; as an adjunct instructor at OPOTA; and as an OPOTA Basic School commander, overseeing the training and graduation of five classes of recruits.

He serves as chairman of the Attorney General's Blue Ribbon Task Force on Law Enforcement Training.

Quinlan is a graduate of the FBI's National Academy and National Executive Institute, and the Major Cities Chiefs Association Police Executive Leadership Institute.

Richard Butsko was hired in December to succeed Quinlan as assistant executive director. A Marine veteran who fought in Desert Storm, Butsko later joined the Grove City Division of Police, where he served for nearly 30 years. He served in every rank and in almost every capacity before being selected chief of police. He is a graduate of the FBI National Academy.

Tom Quinlan

Richard Butsko

Unit since its inception nearly four years ago. "Our purpose isn't to take over a case. We're here to lend our experience and technical support."

BCI has always worked cold case homicides and sexual assaults, but agents were frequently forced to set them aside as new cases took precedence; there was never a unit dedicated to solving them. That changed in March 2020 when Attorney General Dave Yost asked BCI to designate a team to work with local law enforcement to re-examine cold cases.

Today, the Cold Case Unit includes Davis, Criminal Intelligence Director Dana Forney and DNA Lab Supervisor Hallie Dreyer, with each bringing different perspectives and areas of expertise.

Four special agents and a research assistant also are assigned to the unit. In addition, Davis recently arranged so that other agents could be tapped for cold cases as needed.

"Our organizing concept was that everyone who might typically be involved in a cold case — both at the originating agency and at BCI — had to be at the table from the start," Davis said.

The Cold Case Unit is perhaps the most obvious example of the force multiplier concept that the Attorney General's Office provides local law enforcement. It offers a range of specialized knowledge and equipment that most agencies could never expect to have on their own.

Yost's directive to create the Cold Case Unit occurred against a backdrop of technological advances that had substantially enhanced the ability to get usable DNA from old, degraded or tiny amounts of biological evidence. At the same time, a promising new tool to identify criminals was coming into use: forensic genetic genealogy, an investigative technique that relies on information from consumer DNA-testing services.

Early on, Davis anticipated that some law enforcement agencies might resist his holistic team approach, given the profession's historic tendency to work in silos.

"I was hesitant, but we've done a lot of cold case reviews now with BCI and my eyes have been opened," said Doyle Burke, a retired Dayton police detective who consults with the department. "The scientists see stuff that I can't."

Burke, Chief Deputy Rick Minerd of the Franklin County Sheriff's Office and Sgt. Terry McConnell of the Columbus Division of Police Homicide Case Review Unit took part in a panel discussion on cold case investigations in October at the annual Law Enforcement Conference. Davis, who led the panel, was joined by Forney and Dreyer from BCI.

"A lot of people like to keep their cases to

L to R: Special-Agent-In-Charge Roger Davis, Chief Deputy Rick Minerd of the Franklin County Sheriff's Office, Sgt. Terry McConnell of the Columbus Division of Police, Doyle Burke of the Dayton Police Department, DNA Lab Supervisor Hallie Dreyer and Criminal Intelligence Director Dana Forney.

> "A lot of people like to keep their cases to themselves — they want to be the one to solve it. But cold cases rely on teamwork. That's why it's so important to have the lab and intel folks at the table."
>
> **— Sgt. Terry McConnell**
> Columbus Division of Police

themselves — they want to be the one to solve it," McConnell said. "But cold cases rely on teamwork. That's why it's so important to have the lab and intel folks at the table. They can bring cases together in ways that investigators don't always see."

Each cold case begins with an assessment to determine the potential for further investigation.

Dreyer said one of the first things to consider is how the evidence has been handled.

"Investigators in the 1980s and 1990s didn't take the same precautions as they do now when it comes to preserving evidence for DNA analysis," she said. "By having scientists at the table, we're able to determine which items of evidence would provide the best DNA samples."

Once the decision has been made to proceed with an official case review, the BCI team and the team from the originating agency meet to examine every detail: What actions have been taken to date? Were there gaps in the investigation? What old evidence could be analyzed for DNA using new methods? Are there witnesses who were reluctant to talk who might be willing to talk now?

"The case review defines a strategic path forward," Minerd said. "It puts everything on the table — the good, the bad and the ugly. It not only prioritizes evidence, it prioritizes time."

In August, with the help of the BCI Cold Case Unit, Minerd and his team at the Franklin County

Sheriff's Office were able to connect the rape and murder of two women in separate incidents in the 1990s to the same man, Robert Edwards. "It solved a case not only for Franklin County but for Licking County as well," he said. (See accompanying story.)

Criminal intelligence plays a key role. Social media, open source materials, and law enforcement databases containing fingerprint, ballistic and DNA records provide increasingly vast amounts of digital information that analysts can mine to identify suspects.

"That's where my team comes into play," Forney said. "Just because there wasn't an answer at the time of the crime doesn't mean there won't ever be an answer."

The Cold Case Unit conducts reviews with agencies about every 10 days. And, since its inception in 2020, it has responded to 935 calls for assistance. In that same time, the unit and lab have notified Ohio law enforcement agencies of thousands of old sexual assault cases in which technology offers the possibility of providing new leads.

So how many cases have been closed in the past four years? The question, Davis said, defies a simple answer.

"We might close a case at BCI that remains open with the original agency as it awaits new leads," he said. As for the sexual assault cases, BCI typically isn't notified about how those are resolved at the local level.

The important thing, Davis said, is that the expertise and resources that BCI's Cold Case Unit provides to law enforcement is making a difference. And more cases will be cracked as collaboration grows.

To that end, in the next 18 months Davis hopes to launch an annual summit where agencies from across the state can discuss strategies for cold case investigations.

"We've advanced a lot as a team since we began, but we're always evolving and looking for new innovations, new investigative techniques," he said. "I can only imagine where we'll be in 10 years."

NOTABLE SUCCESSES

The five cases summarized here highlight some of the collaborative successes achieved by BCI's Cold Case Unit and its law enforcement partners.
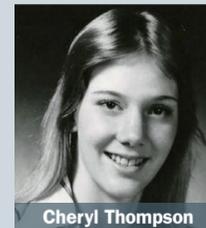

Serial rapist in Dayton cold case gets 44 years in prison
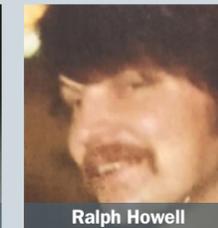**Dayton Police Department**

Between June 2013 and April 2014, four violent sexual assaults occurred in the Dayton area. Physical evidence revealed that DNA from all four cases came from one unknown male. Through the years, the case was worked but no suspect identified. In March 2022, Dayton police asked BCI's Cold Case Unit for help in identifying the serial rapist. BCI's Criminal Intelligence Unit and Laboratory soon turned up an investigative lead on a suspect, and, in October 2022, DNA testing identified the suspect as Dayton resident **Tiandre Turner**. Turner was arrested the following month and charged with the crimes. In April 2023, he was found guilty on more than a dozen charges of rape, kidnapping, felonious assault and abduction, and was sentenced to 44 years in prison.

44 years later, family of slain college student gets justice
Loveland Police Department

Cheryl Thompson   Ralph Howell

Cheryl Thompson, a 19-year-old college freshman, went missing on March 24, 1978. Two weeks later, her partially clothed body was found along the banks of the Little Miami River in Loveland, Ohio. She had been sexually assaulted. Several agencies investigated without success. In 2010, Loveland police asked BCI's Special Investigations Unit to work with them to re-examine the case. BCI lab personnel extracted an undetermined CODIS profile from the evidence, but no suspect was identified. A break came in 2022, when a BCI analyst using genetic genealogy found a potential relationship between the unknown DNA collected from the body and a member of the Howell family. Further genealogical research led to Ralph Howell, who had previously been convicted of abduction as part of an intended sexual assault. Howell had died in a car crash in 1985, but BCI exhumed his body to obtain DNA that ultimately implicated him. In 2022, a grand jury posthumously indicted him.

Law catches up to rapist who was also guilty in infant's death
Conneaut Police Department

In 2020, Conneaut police asked BCI's Cold Case Unit to assist in a 2004 rape case. The victim reported that a man had entered her house at night, then strangled her and beat her with a claw hammer. At the time, BCI conducted lab work on a pair of black men's underwear recovered from nearby woods, and on bedding and other pieces of evidence, but the testing generated no leads. Sixteen years later, as part of the cold case review, the items were retested. A swab of the underwear resulted in a CODIS hit to **Joshua Gurto**. He was convicted in May 2022 and sentenced to 28 years in prison. Five months later, he was sentenced to eight years in the 2017 death of his then-girlfriend's 13-month-old daughter. He was charged with rape and murder but pleaded guilty to amended charges of involuntary manslaughter and felonious assault. His sentence expires in 2052.

Advanced DNA techniques connect murderer to two attacks
Franklin and Licking County Sheriff's Offices

BCI team members involved in the Edwards case, from left: Lori Braunschweiger, Dana Forney, Joe Morbitzer, Kristen Slaper, Roger Davis, Lisa Savage, and Diane Gehres.

The body of 36-year-old Alma Lake was found on June 3, 1991, in southwest Franklin County. Five years later, the body of Michelle Dawson-Pass, 36, was found in Licking County. Both had been strangled to death, and both were left naked in a grassy area. When the investigations went cold, the Franklin County and Licking County sheriff's offices asked BCI's Cold Case Unit for help. BCI's lab was able to develop a DNA profile of the suspect from the evidence, but there were no hits in CODIS. Investigators then searched the database to see whether they could link the DNA profile to possible relatives, which ultimately led them in March 2021 to Robert Edwards. A DNA sample from Edwards matched the DNA left on the victims. In 2023, he was sentenced to life in prison for killing the two women and raping one of them.

Discovery of skeletal remains eventually leads to jealous wife
Mercer County Sheriff's Office

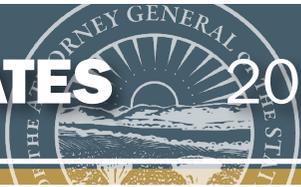Ryan Zimmerman   Sarah Buzzard

In January 2016, the dismembered remains of a young man were found near Grand Lake St. Marys in Mercer County. The investigation went cold until June 2020, when a BCI analyst connected the case to a 2015 missing-person report filed with Columbus police by the parents of Ryan Zimmerman. DNA confirmed that the remains were those of their son. In August 2015, Zimmerman — whom prosecutors said was "exploring his sexual preference" — had moved from Kentucky to Columbus to live with a man he met online. The man was married to Sarah Buzzard, and together they shared an apartment with Buzzard's friend and eventual criminal partner, Naira Jen Whitaker. The two women had an intimate relationship and would later marry and move to Indiana. Investigators from the Mercer County Sheriff's Office and BCI agents tracked down evidence from websites and social media and uncovered physical evidence that ultimately implicated the women. When she was arrested in August 2021, Buzzard said Zimmerman had ruined her marriage. Whitaker shot and killed herself before she could be arrested. In 2022, Buzzard was sentenced to life in prison.

Mark Your Calendar

Coming in May

OHIO PEACE OFFICERS MEMORIAL CEREMONY 2024

Fallen Officers Memorial Ceremony: This year's ceremony will take place at 10:30 a.m. on May 2 at the Ohio Peace Officer Training Academy in London.

2 DAYS IN MAY

Two Days in May: The 2024 conference on crime victim assistance will be held on May 13-14 in a new location: the Hilton Downtown Columbus, 402 N. High St.

More details about these events will be available on the Attorney General's website in the coming months.

ON THE JOB
CRIMINAL JUSTICE UPDATE

DAVE YOST
OHIO ATTORNEY GENERAL

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