



NEWS

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# Lead investigator on Ayla Reynolds case seeks closure for family

Three years later, Maine State Police Sgt. Jeff Love says the case remains active will continue 'until we find Ayla.'

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When Maine State Police Sgt. Jeff Love arrived at the Waterville police station the morning of Dec. 17, 2011, a massive police investigation was already underway.

Ayla Reynolds, 20 months old, had been reported missing from her home at 29 Violette Ave. earlier that morning, a sunny but cold day. City police and fire officials scoured neighborhoods, hoping to find the child nearby.

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## ADDITIONAL IMAGES



Maine State Police Sgt. Jeff Love, a detective and the lead investigator on the Ayla Reynolds case, seen in his Augusta office with the case files last week.  
*Staff photo by Andy Molloy*



Maine State Police Sgt. Jeff Love, right, the lead detective in the Ayla Reynolds case, confers with Troop D Detective Adam McNaughton at the state police barracks in Augusta last week. *Staff photo by Andy Molloy*



Authorities clear the Messalonskee Stream of ice under the North Street as they prepare to continue the search for Ayla Reynolds. *Staff file photo by Michael G. Seamans*



Maine State Police have taped off the residence where 20-month-old Ayla Reynolds was last seen in a picture taken Dec. 22, 2011. *Staff file photo by Michael G. Seamans*



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Ayla’s family — her father, Justin DiPietro, his sister and his girlfriend — said they had no idea where the toddler, clad in pajamas and with her arm in a cast, could have gone. They told police they last saw her the night before in bed.

As temperatures dropped from just below 20 early in the day to 15 into Sunday morning, the effort to find Ayla intensified. Several area police departments, fire departments, state police and residents of the area looked for the child in a door-to-door ground search, with tracking dogs, in nearby Messalonskee Stream and from the air. They looked in houses, under decks, inside Dumpsters, and authorities even drained a pond on First Rangeway.

“It was very clear from my perspective that all available resources needed to be put into the investigation,” Love said in an interview last week with the Morning Sentinel. “The tone was set very early that we were

going to bring in every available resource until we could find Ayla.”

By Monday, two days after she was reported missing, the search for Ayla ballooned to involve the Maine Warden Service, FBI, organized volunteers as well as countless residents of Waterville and its surrounding towns.

Ten days after she was reported missing, the case became a criminal investigation.

Though there have been reports, confirmed by police in February 2012, of Ayla’s blood being found in the house, Love would not discuss specifics of the investigation or what evidence was found in the house that eventually led police to come to that conclusion.

More than 20 searches for Ayla have been conducted, mostly in Waterville, although police have also searched other towns and parts of the state. The most recent search took place in October 2013 in Oakland, prompted by tips, and involved more than 30 state and local police officers as well as wardens from the Maine Warden Service.

Authorities have never acknowledged finding any evidence of Ayla’s whereabouts.

The case has been called the biggest in the state’s history. Love has been the lead investigator since that first day.

## **MISSING CHILD REPORT**

Love is 40 and has worked for the Maine State Police for 16 years, including 10 years in the criminal division. He’s a graduate of the University of Southern Maine and worked at the York Police Department part-time while getting a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice. He went to high school in Winthrop.

He was doing yard work at his Belgrade home that Saturday morning in 2011 when he got a phone call from Waterville police asking for his help finding the missing toddler.

It’s not unusual for Love, a supervisor in the detective division for the Maine State Police, to get calls about cases at home and on weekends. When he heard how young the child was, he knew he had to respond right away.

He wasn’t scheduled to work that day, but he drove to Waterville, where he met with detectives and officers on what resources the state police could offer to aid in the early stages of the search for Ayla Reynolds.

Waterville Police Chief Joseph Massey, who worked closely with Love in the initial days of the investigation and continues to work on the case, said Ayla’s age and her physical condition — she had a

broken arm and was wearing a cast — increased police’s concern that morning.

It’s one reason Massey called Love and other members of the state police to the scene immediately.

The weather also heightened concerns. Temperatures had hovered in the high 20s overnight Friday into Saturday and initially warmed to about 30 during the day. But the wind was brisk and the temperature never got above freezing.

Investigators later said it was highly unlikely that Ayla left the house on her own, or that she was abducted during the night. Violette Avenue is a populated residential neighborhood with small houses close to one another. Massey noted that there are few trees or other obstacles that would have prevented someone from seeing Ayla in her green one-piece polka-dot pajamas with the words “Daddy’s Princess.”

“And yet, by 10:30 in the morning, not one person had reported that they had observed a little girl, whether that was a neighbor, or traffic or vehicles going by,” Massey said. “We knew time was of the essence to try and get her back and make sure she wasn’t harmed.”

As the sun went down Saturday, temperatures dropped. By Sunday, they were in the teens and eventually reached a low of 6 degrees.

Sunday afternoon, the FBI had been called in to assist state and local police and the Maine Warden Service in the search. Two search dogs, one from the Warden Service and one from Maine State Police, were on the Violette Avenue property for much of the day Sunday.

On Monday, as the search swelled to 70 law enforcement agents, the search began to focus on the house. Police seized cars belonging to DiPietro and Courtney Roberts, his girlfriend.

In the hours after Ayla was reported missing, the family was moved out of the house. As Christmas came and went, crime scene tape blocked the entrances and investigators said they didn’t think Ayla left the house by herself. Before the new year, police had declared it a criminal case.

The search for Ayla has been the most extensive criminal investigation in the state, but Love said it’s not the longest he’s worked on a case. “Unfortunately, all cases in our unit remain open until they can be formally closed and we have some unsolved cases that have been open for over 20 years.”

The Ayla Reynolds case has resonated not just with Ayla’s family, a state and national public, but also with the law enforcement officers who continue to work on solving it, he said.

“Whenever there’s a child involved in an investigation, it gets top priority,” he said.

“I think the reason investigators remain so determined is because it involves a small, innocent child and

our job is to bring closure to these families and to find out what happened,” Love said. “Our work doesn’t stop until that happens. I can’t imagine what the family has gone through, and that’s part of that determination, day in and day out, to do everything we can to try and bring closure to the family.”

Now, there are no further on-the-ground searches planned for Ayla, but Love said he doesn’t doubt that there will be future searches.

Police have long maintained that they do not believe Ayla will be found alive. But Love, who is a father, said that investigators are determined to provide closure for the family.

“Our work will not stop until we find Ayla,” he said.

## **TIPS KEEP COMING**

To date, there have been 1,464 tips reported in Ayla’s case, which far exceeds the few hundred tips that police would normally receive. Usually, a missing person case generates between 600 and 800 tips, Love said.

The information continues to come in almost on a weekly basis, from people around the country, and a core group of investigators reviews the information, comparing new information to the case file and making decisions to include or exclude the new information, Love said. Every lead that has come in has been explored, and at times when there are no leads coming in, police are still reviewing the case file.

“When we get a lead, we get some hope from that. When we run that lead out and determine there’s no helpful information there, at times, that is disappointing, but our job is to bring Ayla home for the family and find out the facts of what happened,” Love said.

Maine State Police also continue to believe that the people who were in the house the night Ayla disappeared — DiPietro, Roberts, and Justin’s sister, Elisha DiPietro — have withheld information from the police that’s relevant to the case.

“We’ve said for a long time now that we’re looking for answers to the questions we’ve asked and we just don’t feel like we’ve gotten those answers yet,” Love said.

Trista Reynolds, Ayla’s mother, and her family have called on police to press charges against the three adults, but there isn’t enough evidence to hold anyone responsible for Ayla’s disappearance, said Lisa Marchese, deputy attorney general for the state of Maine.

DiPietro, who did not respond to requests for comment, has said in the past he believes someone abducted his daughter from the house after she was put to bed. Police have since dismissed that explanation based on the investigation.

Marchese noted that charges are still possible in cases years after the fact.

“If someone witnessed a homicide on the street, obviously that’s the best time (to go to trial) because the memory of what someone saw is present and people’s memories tend to be better closer in time to the event,” she said. “But simply because time has gone by doesn’t mean, however, that the case is bad or poor.”

For example, in 2007, Michael Hutchinson of Bridgton, was sentenced to life in prison in connection with the 1994 murder of 30-year-old Crystal Perry.

“I think about Ayla Reynolds a lot,” Marchese said. “I think every case in the attorney general’s office is very important, but when you look at that smiling, adorable face, when you see it on TV or something, my heart just breaks.”

Marchese, who recently took over in the attorney general’s office for Bill Stokes, who handled the case previously, said she hasn’t yet met with Reynolds or other members of Ayla’s family, but that they are welcome to contact the office.

Love, too, said that investigators are in regular contact with Ayla’s family, that they have his phone number and can contact him day or night.

“When I walked into Waterville PD that very first day, it was clear that they had put every available resource into finding Ayla. That was the initial response and that’s what has continued on in this investigation,” he said.

## **THE MISSING**

There are dozens of unsolved criminal cases in the state of Maine, and six long-term missing child cases, not all of which are criminal cases.

Hundreds of children are reported missing every month, but they are usually found quickly, said Steve McCausland, spokesman for the Maine Department of Public Safety. The [National Center for Missing and Exploited Children](#) says that of the 800,000 children reported missing annually, only 115 are stranger abductions.

Including Ayla, [Maine has six open missing children cases](#). Two of them were very young, like Ayla. Kurt Newton, 4, of Manchester, was reported missing Sept. 1, 1975, as his family camped at Chain of Ponds, north of Eustis in Franklin County. Douglas Chapman of Alfred was 3 when he was reported missing June 2, 1971.

Also missing are teenagers Cathy Marie Moulton of Portland, 16 when she was reported missing Sept. 24, 1971; Bernard Ross of Ashland, 18 when he was reported missing May 12, 1977; and Kimberly Ann Moreau of Jay, 17 when she was reported missing May 11, 1986.

Todd Matthews, of the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System, [said in an interview last year](#) that most of the time an initial missing-person report is canceled because a person turns up or their fate is determined. He said 661,000 people were reported missing in the United States in 2012. By the end of the year, all but 2,079 of those cases had been resolved.

A 2002 study by the U.S. Department of Justice found that almost 800,000 children were reported missing during a one-year time period — an average of 2,185 children per day, [the Morning Sentinel reported in February 2012](#). The report estimates that 340,500 of those children were reported missing for “benign” reasons, including running away. Of those that involved kidnappings, 56,500 were family abductions and 12,100 were stranger abductions.

“Cases like Ayla’s are once a decade,” McCausland said.

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