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SUPPORT GROWS FOR COLD CASE SQUAD IN MAINE

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An online petition for the state of Maine to fund a cold case squad is being circulated by the friends and family of people who have gone missing or become victims of unsolved murders.

Last year, Gov. Paul LePage signed into law LD-1734, which creates a cold case homicide unit under the Attorney General's Office. But the law was not given any funding, so the unit has still not been created.

Cold case units investigate cases that have stopped yielding leads. Some can be decades old.

The group calling itself Cold Case Squad Maine says there are 148 unsolved murders and missing persons cases in Maine. Twenty-eight cases involve missing people; the rest are unsolved murders. The group's petition can be found on change.org. As of Monday, 2,299 people had signed the petition to fund the squad.

Petitioners hope to gather 5,000 signatures.

"We wanted to show a strong response," said Patrick Day, founder of Cold Case Squad Maine of the goal.

He said he started the petition in northern Maine, where he has more contacts since he is from Millinocket. Since then, he's expanded the drive south, where he is getting a growing amount of support.

Day, a warm-weather resident of Rockland, led the movement to get LD-1734 signed into law and is now organizing an effort to get it funded.

There are at least two unsolved missing persons cases in the greater Fryeburg area.

Angel "Tony" Torres disappeared from the Biddeford/Old Orchard Beach area almost 16 years ago. At the time, Torres, who grew up in Denmark, Maine, was a 21-year-old junior at Framingham State College in Massachusetts.

His parents, Ramona and Narciso Torres of Denmark, have supported the effort to get the cold case unit funded. Even though they have had Tony's death certificate for over a decade, they still seek closure. The Torreses say that they have met several times with the investigators working Tony's case and were told they were doing the best they could with the resources available.

The Torres family said that when a lead pops up, investigators cannot react to it in a timely way because they are too busy working fresh cases. By the time investigators start looking at the new lead, that lead has also "gone cold," the according to the family .

"As the legislature meets to determine whether or not we need a cold case unit here in the State of Maine, it becomes clear to us that, having lived this nightmare for the last 15 and a half years, a cold case unit is exactly what is needed," the Torres family wrote in a letter that was sent to Maine lawmakers.

"The additional resources provided by such a unit will assist in solving these cases and bringing closure to those families who, like ours, continue to search for information about a loved one."

Foul play is suspected in Tony's case. The Torres family said that they and other families who have experienced the same loss believe that a cold case unit would benefit Maine because there are murderers on the loose.

Another local case is that of Roger Merton Day. Roger, then 14, went missing on Oct. 4, 1973, after leaving his Porter, Maine, home in order to attend the Fryeburg Fair. His family put out a plea for information in 2013, the 40th anniversary of his disappearance.

Beth Day, Roger's sister, said her family supports the effort to fund the cold case unit.

Patrick Day, no relation to Roger Day, has been pushing for the squad to try to get justice for his friend Joyce McLain of Millinocket, who was murdered in 1980.

After living out of state, Patrick Day returned to Maine last year and learned that McLain's murder was still unsolved. At the time, Day figured her murder was the only cold case in Maine but he later found that was far from true. He said some victims' parents die without knowing what happened to their children.

The state Attorney General's Office told Day to try to get a cold case squad going. So he teamed up with Maine State Rep. Steve Stanley (D-Medway), and they got to work on bill LD-1734, which was signed into law last April.

"If it was my family, I would want to know before I passed away," said Day, who suffers from throat cancer. "I want these families to see justice in their lifetimes."

The cost of the proposed cold case squad was originally about \$520,000 a year, said Day, adding that the amount would have funded four detectives and a lab technician.

But before the governor signed the bill, the budget was whittled down to two detectives and a

lab technician and an annual cost of \$280,000. Day said three lawmakers have generated bills to start up the squad. The bills have been sent to the revisor's office and will be joined into one bill.

Day said LePage's proposed budget calls for \$8 million in spending for several new drug agents, four judges and 22 assistant district attorneys. Day would like to see the governor make room for the cold case squad by cutting back on a couple of the proposed positions.

The Maine Attorney General's Office said it appreciates Day's mission.

"The Attorney General's office supports efforts to establish and fund a cold case squad in Maine," said Deputy Attorney General Lisa Marchese. "We have yet to see the legislation regarding the same but hope to soon. In order to be successful, it is imperative that the cold case squad be funded, and we appreciate efforts to ensure its funding."

There will be a legislative hearing for the new cold case bills, said Day, adding that the date has not yet been set. He said the hearing will be advertised at least two weeks in advance. Day and other cold case squad petitioners plan to have a rally in Augusta, Maine, on the day of the hearing. Day said the Fund Cold Case Squad Maine's Facebook page will provide details. Day also has a website, coldcasesquadme.com.

In an effort to get the squad funded, Day also reached out to members of Ayla Reynolds family. In 2011, Ayla, then a toddler, went missing, and now they are working together. Ayla's case made national news.

"We are pooling our resources," said Jeff Hanson, who is Ayla's step-grandfather.

Hanson, who is spreading the word about the petition drive, runs a websites called unitedforayla.com, to bring attention to Ayla's case. He recently expanded the mission of the site to include information about others who have been murdered or gone missing in Maine. Unitedforayla.com now hosts profiles of those victims. One is about Roger Day.

Hanson believes the Maine State Police are short-staffed and overworked. He said his research indicates that other states, such as New Hampshire, have had success with cold case squads. Hanson believes there is clearly a need for one in Maine.

"To know what happened to a loved one can be a tragedy, but to not know is devastating," Hanson said. "Day after day. Month after month. Year after year."

Hanson credits Day with "paving the way" to getting the cold case squad law passed. "Now we have to get it funded."

The petition can be found at www.change.org/p/permanently-fund-a-cold-case-squad-in-maine



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