

PRESS RELEASE

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SANDOVAL COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE SHARES SUCCESSFUL COLD CASE INVESTIGATION UPDATES

Sheriff's Office stated that dedicated staff and access to new and broader forensic technology work to realize the County's goal of bringing closure to families, and if required, justice for the deceased

Bernalillo, NM, January 27, 2026: **Sandoval County Undersheriff Joe Gonzales** addressed local media today and reported that four cold cases have been solved in the past 18 months, representing 83% of the backlog of such cases. *Undersheriff Gonzales* said, "Our message today is two-fold. First, we are committed to identifying anyone who is discovered deceased in our County—no exceptions. We want to know who they were, we want to give closure to their families, and if required, we want to seek justice for the deceased. Second, these cases are a priority and will not be ignored. Our expanded staff, dedicated to these cases, uses a combination of forensics, advanced technology, and resources powered by law enforcement expertise and experience in detective work. We will find the answers, and if you have committed a crime against these individuals, we will hold you accountable. Our current results demonstrate this."

Before introducing *Detective Donald Chewning*, who leads these investigations, **Sandoval County Manager Wayne Johnson** said, "We are a Class A County and one of the fastest growing in the state. With growth comes the real-world reality. We have crime here, which we address, and also because of our rural geography, we are vulnerable to those wishing to hide their crimes. Our Sheriff's Office knows this, and that's why two years ago, it took the steps necessary to mitigate this vulnerability by hiring Donald Chewning, a detective with years of experience and expertise in such cases."

THE CASES

Before discussing case specifics, Detective Chewning explained that some had gone dormant because traditional investigative methods had been exhausted. He shared that uncooperative witnesses, a lack of witnesses, and unreliable testimony impede investigative progress, too. According to Chewning, what made the difference in moving these cases forward was improvement and advancement in forensic science and genetic genealogy, in combination with applied detective work and having the time allotted for that work.

Chewning also thanked and acknowledged representatives of the Albuquerque Police Department, the Corrales Police Department, the Albuquerque field office of the FBI, the Rocky Mountain Information Network, the Sandoval County Fire and Rescue K-9 team, and the Sandoval County Sheriff's Office. In addition, he reminded those in attendance that individuals with information can call the dedicated tip line, 505-867.7350, and share information on *Sandoval County Unsolved Cases* (facebook.com/sandovalunsolved).

Sandoval County, one of the fastest-growing counties in New Mexico, encompasses 3,714 square miles of diverse geography and has a population of more than 160,000 people. It includes the incorporated municipalities of Bernalillo, Cuba, Corrales, Jemez Springs, Rio Rancho, San Ysidro, the Town of Cochiti Lake, numerous unincorporated communities, and all or portions of 12 Indian Pueblos and Tribal Nations. For more information, visit www.sandovalcountynm.gov.

Here are cases profiled:

Steven Overton



If you have any additional information concerning Steven Overton, please call 505.867.7350, the Sandoval County Sheriff's Office dedicated phone line for Unsolved Cases.

TIMEFRAME & DETAILS

December 12, 2015

Hikers discovered human skeletal remains in the Cibola National Forest off of Forest Loop Road, Pecos.

January 1, 2026

SCSO contacted the New Mexico Office of the Medical Investigator in reviewing these remains using the SCISO drone during a 4-hour search. With the remains, SCISO found a Sheriff's Discovery Rewards Card with an ID account number.

Smith's stated that the card was registered to Missing Person Steven Overton, who disappeared from Hobbs in August 2022. Overton was reported missing by Albuquerque Police Department on August 23, 2022.

January 2026

The human remains were identified as Mr. Steven Overton by use of his dental records. Mr. Overton's death is not believed to be suspicious in nature at this time. Mr. Overton's family members have been notified.

DETAILS

Date Identified: January 7, 2026 using Dental Records

Case Resolved in 7 days.

Assisting Agency: Albuquerque Police Department



Hector Manuel Ramirez, Jr.



If you have any additional information concerning Hector Manuel Ramirez, Jr., please call 505.867.7350, the Sandoval County Sheriff's Office dedicated phone line for Unsolved Cases.

TIMEFRAME & DETAILS

October 4, 2025

On 10/04/25, unidentified human remains were discovered in the Cibola National Forest by a hunter east of the Sandoval Main Cave. From the information recovered there, NM OMI and Oklahoma State University Center for Health Sciences were able to make a positive DNA match between Hector Ramirez and his mother.

Hector was diagnosed with schizophrenia. His mother had contact with him in 2017 while he was in El Paso, Texas. Previously reported contacts with Hector were from Las Cruces, the Navajo Nation, and the Albuquerque West Side Emergency Shelter. Evidence suggests that Hector may have become disoriented in the mountains and likely died from exposure. Ramirez was NOT reported missing.

SCSO Criminal Investigation Unit discovered that Hector had been homeless and living throughout New Mexico and Texas for several years. SCISO also received a report that a homeless individual(s) was staying in the forest areas from the Sandoval Main Cave parking lot over a year ago along Route 65.

DETAILS

Date Identified: November 3, 2026, using DNA

Case resolved in 29 days.

Assisting Agencies: Albuquerque Field Office of the FBI Emergency Response Team, Sandoval County Fire & Rescue K-9 Team, the Office of the NM OMI, and the Texas Rangers of the Texas Department of Public Safety.



Jeanette Marie De La Cruz



If you have any additional information concerning Jeanette Marie De La Cruz, please call 505.867.7350, the Sandoval County Sheriff's Office dedicated phone line for Unsolved Cases.

Former Persons of Interest



Fred Lott Grinnell (L) and Derrick Law Smith (R)

TIMEFRAME & DETAILS

November 15, 1999

Unidentified female human remains with signs of criminal scavenging were discovered on Cubazon Road, approximately 4 miles west of Bl 550, San Ysidro, NM.

June 2025

With the assistance of Chiron Labs of The Woodlands, Woodlands, TX, DNA identified these remains as Jeanette De La Cruz. The cause and manner of death were ruled undetermined at the time of her autopsy. Jeanette was identified 26 years after her disappearance.

June 2024 to June 2025: What was learned through an extensive, multi-agency, multi-state investigation

Jeanette was 19 years old when she went missing. She was last seen by her father on 10/20/1999, with Fred Grinnell, 44 years old, an Albuquerque businessman and Corrales resident, Jeanette's father, Christopher De La Cruz, filed a missing person's report with Corrales Police Department on 10/27/1999 after being unable to contact his daughter or locate her at the Grinnell residence. Jeanette became addicted to illicit drugs in her mid-teens. Mr. Grinnell and an associate, Derrick L. Smith of Albuquerque, were known to use illicit drugs. Jeanette knew both men. It was determined that Jeanette likely died of a suspected heroin/cocaine overdose in the Grinnell/Corrales residence. NM OMI indicated that the autopsy and toxicology findings could be consistent with an overdose.

Fred Grinnell and Derrick Smith recently admitted that Jeanette overdosed and was discovered in a bathtub in Grinnell's apartment. They admitted that they panicked and took her body to public lands to bury. They fled the site when an unknown vehicle drove by. Their statements are supported by a police informant in 2010. The 13th Judicial District Attorney's Office reviewed this case, and declined the prosecution of Fred Grinnell and Derrick Smith based on insufficient evidence and age of the victim.

DETAILS

Date Identified: November 3, 2026 using DNA

Case resolved after 26 years.

Detectives: Donald Chewning, Sandoval County Sheriff's Office, and Detective Sgt. John Cobin of Corrales PD

Assisting Agencies: NM Office of the Medical Investigator, Albuquerque PD Intelligence Unit, the Portland, Oregon Police Bureau, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, and the Butler County Sheriff's Office of Hamilton, OH.



KIMO MAHI



SANDOVAL STAR



If you have any additional information concerning Kimo Mahi or Sandoval Star, please call 505.867.7350, the Sandoval County Sheriff's Office dedicated phone line for Unsolved Cases.

TIMEFRAME & DETAILS

May 2001

Hikers in the Santa Fe National Forest, Sandoval County, discovered the skeletonized human remains of a then-unknown individual.

July 2025

Advanced DNA technology enabled the remains to be positively identified as Kimo Mahi, who was born Keesha Worford in 1951. He had been last seen by his family in 1992.

This is still considered a suspicious death.



April 18, 2023

Human remains were found by Pecos residents who were walking along RM 165 in the Cibola National Forest.

April 17, 2025

SCISO held a media event to offer the assistance of the public in identifying this deceased female. Progress has been made in this case and an update will be held in Spring 2026.

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