



TREE TRIMMING BY POWER COMPANY: Detroit Edison, a unit of DTE Energy, plans to dispatch tree-trimming crews to several communities in the next two months. The utility says fallen limbs and tree branches create about two-thirds of power outages during severe weather. It plans to trim trees in counties including Huron, Lapeer, Livingston, Macomb, Oakland, St. Clair, Washtenaw and Wayne.

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Man in morgue while daughter searched for help

By MEGHA SATYANARAYANA
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

For two months, Doris Gunter searched for her father, a dementia sufferer who wandered from her home July 16.

She repeatedly called police, drove around Detroit, hung flyers with his photo and asked about John Does at hospitals and the Wayne County morgue.

Six days after wandering

off, the body of L.J. Blevins, 71, was found without ID in a field near 12th and Fort streets in Detroit. As Gunter searched for him, Blevins' body lay in the morgue, one of the 10 or so unidentified bodies Wayne County sees per year.

Gunter went to the morgue Sept. 29 to view a man initially described as younger and wearing different clothes. She broke down when she saw the



L.J. Blevins, 71, wandered from his daughter's home July 16. As the daughter searched, Blevins' body lay in the morgue.

wristwatch — it was her father's.

"I really didn't want that to be my dad," said Gunter, who held a memorial service for

Blevins on Thursday.

Area medical examiners say most John Does are identified within a few days, and police participation is key.

Blevins' case summary shows no record of communication between police and ME investigators. When asked, Detroit Police said the Wayne County Medical Examiner's Office would start getting more detailed reports about

missing people.

Oakland County Medical Examiner Dr. Ljubisa Dragovic said Gunter's efforts should have been those of police and the ME's office.

"It's a dereliction of duty and a betrayal of the population served," Dragovic said. "It's not (her) duty to go through that."

■ JOHN DOE'S NATURAL DEATH LOW PRIORITY, OFFICIALS SAY. 5A

Daughter angry dad sat in morgue

County: John Doe's death low priority

By MEGHA SATYANARAYANA
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With missing person data, fingerprinting, X-rays, dental work, scars and other physical features, the Oakland and Macomb county medical examiners say that truly unidentifiable bodies are rare.

"The whole endeavor is to identify the person and the next of kin," said Oakland County Medical Examiner Dr. Ljubisa Dragovic, adding that anything less, "is the type of thing that betrays the function and the concept of the function of the medical examiner."

Yet, in August and September, while she searched Detroit, Doris Gunter's father lay at the Wayne County Medical Examiner's Office, dead of apparent heart disease. He had been there for two months — a low-priority case of natural, versus violent, death, county officials said.

L.J. Blevins, 71, had been in Detroit only a few weeks before he wandered away from his daughter's backyard in the fog of dementia. When Detroit police found him near the Ambassador Bridge six days later, Blevins had changed clothes. His wallet — filled with ID cards — was gone.



REGINA H. BOONE/Detroit Free Press

In August and September, while she searched Detroit, Doris Gunter's father lay dead at the Wayne County Medical Examiner's Office.

Gunter said she is both angry and guilt-ridden that neither she nor police found her father alive. She held his memorial service on Thursday, and the cremated remains will go to Blevins' family in Mississippi. As for two months of searching, while he lay in the morgue, she's simply angry.

"Nobody has a future here. There are no caring souls," she said.

With neighboring medical examiners extolling the role of police in addition to forensics for identifying John Does, a Free Press examination of Blevins' case summary shows little communication between Detroit Police, the Medical Examiner's Office and Gunter, who said she called both numerous times with few results.

County officials refused requests for interviews with the ME investigators involved in Blevins' case, but Wayne County spokesman Dennis Niemiec said office staff won't log any of the 13,000 calls they receive per year on John Does unless the call might lead to identification.

Gunter said an early August call was the only time she learned of any John Doe in the office, a man Niemiec said Investigator Reginald Harvel described as in his 50s. Gunter balked at coming in because her dad was much older.

Yet, in the John Doe's pockets were a watch, some beads and things belonging to Blevins. The investigator didn't share that information with Gunter, said Niemiec, to avoid a false positive identification. But Macomb County Medical Examiner Dr. Daniel Spitz said

father lay dead at the Wayne County Medical Examiner's Office.

he would have shared it.

"We go to elaborate steps to identify a person," Spitz said. "It's a lot of different things. It's not a cookbook."

Several weeks later, when Gunter finally decided to go to the morgue, it was those items that assured her that the body before her was actually her father.

Absent from the file is any indication that ME investigators talked to Detroit Police as part of their attempts to identify Blevins.

Gunter had filled out a police notice given to members of the news media with details and a photo of her father — more information than the ME typically gets from police. Every few weeks, Detroit police give ME investigators a list of missing people's names, Niemiec said.

Dragovic said investigators in his office often call police departments for their help in identifying John Does.

Sgt. Eren Stephens, Detroit Police spokeswoman, said the

officer with Blevins' case did what he could, given his work load. Gunter said the officer returned her calls once, telling her to hire a private investigator.

"We're doing everything we can in our realm. It's almost like finding a needle in a haystack," Stephens said.

After the Free Press inquiry, Stephens said the ME's office will now receive the same detailed alerts sent to the news media.

But Gunter said she is pained that her father was no one's priority but hers.

"It's a human being," she said, regardless of who or how they died.

The Free Press offered to provide a description of the three unidentified bodies at the Wayne County morgue. The bodies will be kept for at least 60 days before burial, Niemiec said. The ME's office refused.

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Family photo

L.J. Blevins, 71, had been in Detroit only a few weeks before he wandered away from his daughter's backyard in the fog of dementia. Detroit police found his body near the Ambassador Bridge six days later.