

The Justice Files: Legislation would restrict DNA usage

New bill would block law enforcement from broadly searching DNA testing company databases to solve crimes

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SALT LAKE CITY (ABC4 Utah) – Solving cold cases could become more difficult.

That's according to the founder of Utah's Cold Case Coalition. Karra Porter says the legislature will be considering a bill that is designed to restrict usage of DNA available at websites like GEDMatch.

"It's going to make it very difficult to solve cold cases where there is an unknown subject," said Porter.

Rep. Craig Hall of West Valley said his legislation is still in draft form but should be ready for this year's legislative session.

Law enforcement is using websites like GEDMatch to help solve cold cases.

GEDMatch was used to crack the case involving the "Golden State Killer."

It helped law enforcement arrest Joseph James Deangelo dubbed the "Golden State killer."

For nearly 40 years, the murders of 13 women in California went unsolved.

Joseph James Deangelo became a suspect after law enforcement linked him to a relative who submitted DNA to the ancestry website.

It's become a tool widely used by law enforcement.

"Just last week, they used this GEDMatch website in another state and solved not only this girl's murder but they believe they can now link this man to a string of murders," said Porter.

The website matches DNA of relatives and law enforcement uses those matches to find suspects.

In Utah, it was used to help arrest a suspect who assaulted a church organist, but the case did cause GEDMatch to tighten privacy controls.

Rep. Hall's proposed legislation will restrict its usage even further.

“My bill would prohibit the mass searches of tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, even millions of genetic databases by the government,” said Rep. Hall.

The lawmaker wants to protect the rights of relatives who are linked to the donor and didn’t sign off on allowing police access to it. Organizations like Utah’s ACLU and Libertas want to ban these so-called fishing expeditions by law enforcement.

Nationwide, DNA testing through GEDMatch identified 28 suspects in 2018 cold cases, another 59 last year.

If the legislature adopts Rep. Hall’s DNA privacy bill, cold case advocates worry unsolved crimes will continue to gather dust.

“I should have the right to consent to use my own DNA to help solve murder,” said Porter.

Rep. Hall said law enforcement can still access DNA, including those of relatives as long as they have probable cause and an order is signed by a judge.