



# George Mason University

## Forensic Science Research and Training Laboratory

### Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ's)

## FAQ's

### **What is the Forensic Science Research and Training Laboratory (FSRTL) at George Mason University (Mason)?**

Mason's FSRTL (commonly known as the Body Farm) consists of approximately five acres of fenced and secured property on Mason's Science and Technology Campus in Manassas, VA. Donors to the FSRTL are a great asset as their bodies and skeletal remains are utilized for a wide variety of research and training efforts to perform research and educate Mason students and personnel from other appropriate agencies and institutions.

### **What kind of research and training does the FSRTL conduct?**

The FSRTL is engaged in a wide variety of research and training focused on the location and identification of human remains to include the establishment of the postmortem interval or time since death. Some of the research planned for the FSRTL include but are not limited to the following: overall rates of outdoor, earth or unearthened body decomposition, locating clandestine graves through honeybees, identifying organic chemical compounds in human decomposition, impact of animal predation on decomposing bodies, wound pathology and injury patterns caused by decomposition, DNA analysis, body location through drones with specialized equipment, and post-mortem criminal offender behavior. Donors will also be used for cadaver dog training and research by law enforcement agencies, officers, and qualified canine handlers. In addition, other research/training areas may include geology, botany, entomology, and other related sciences.

There will be a variety of scenarios that are designed around the placement of each donor. These scenarios include but are not limited to encasement in, around, and under cement; mass grave placements, vehicle encasement, burials, on top of the ground placement, dismemberment, mutilation, burning/fire and other attempts to destroy a body or parts thereof, water submersion, and hangings. We will protect the donor's anonymity and they will be always handled with respect. A single donor can be used for multiple research projects to maximize the scientific research across a broad area of disciplines to include forensic biology, forensic chemistry, entomology, crime scene investigation, fire and arson investigation, and canine research, among others.

Up to now, this type of research has not been conducted in this region of the United States, and research from similar facilities indicate that different regions of the country and their specific ecosystems can and do impact human remains and human decomposition in significant ways. The more we understand about our specific ecosystem here in northern Virginia and along the mid-Atlantic seaboard, we can educate and train researchers, law enforcement, and others to more quickly locate and better understand human remains, the impact of the environment on a human being left outside offender behavior and treatment of a victim at an outdoor crime scene/body disposal area, the science of decomposition, clandestine graves and more.



## **George Mason University Forensic Science Research and Training Laboratory Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ's)**

### **Must an individual pre-register to be donated to the FSRTL?**

Pre-registration for the FSRTL is available, however pre-registration is not necessary to donate a body to the FSRTL. If the donor has already passed away, and the next of kin decide to donate their loved one to science, the next of kin will be responsible for registering the donor. All donors to the FSRTL must come through the established protocols of the Virginia State Anatomical Program (VSAP) of the Virginia Department of Health as required by Code of Virginia § 54.1-2825. Potential donors must register with the Virginia State Anatomical Program (<https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/medical-examiner/vsap/vsap-forms/>) to be eligible. George Mason University reserves the right to decline a donation due to the condition of the body after death or issues with authorization. Should a potential donor be declined, the family/next of kin would assume responsibility for arrangements of disposition.

### **What happens to a donor's body once it is donated to the FSRTL?**

Mason will work with the VSAP to arrange for transportation of the donor to the FSRTL. Donors will then be placed within the secure FSRTL facility for various forms of research/training mentioned above.

### **Will the FSRTL accept a donor who has donated their organs, been autopsied, or embalmed?**

The FSRTL will accept donors who have donated organs and been autopsied but will not accept donors who have been embalmed.

*Donating one's body to science is the ultimate gift.  
Because of your generosity, we will be able to pursue and accomplish our research goals at the  
Forensic Science Research and Training Laboratory. With this knowledge, we can assist law  
enforcement and others in significant ways to locate loved ones more quickly, better understand what  
happened to them, solve cases,  
and ultimately pursue justice on their behalf.*



George Mason University's Forensic Science Program

### **Human Donor Program Terms & Conditions**

Forensic Science Research and Training Laboratory (FSRTL)

The identification of unknown and missing persons is critical to their families and the community. In cases of homicide, murders often remain unsolved unless the victim is first positively identified. Methods for locating burials, identifying unknown persons, and establishing the timeline from when a person went missing is crucial to solving cases and the successful prosecution of cases.

The Forensic Science Program at George Mason University (Mason) and Mason's collaborators are actively engaged in transformative research designed to generate new methods to identify unknown persons, establish the postmortem interval or time since death, and locate human remains using a variety of methods (remote sensing, human remains detection canines). Topical research areas include forensic and biological anthropology, human biology (DNA) and chemistry, geology, botany, entomology, etc. Assistance from human donors is necessary for Mason to validate existing standards, develop new methods for assessing trauma, establish innovative methods for locating clandestine burials and to develop new tools for investigators.

Mason understands that the donation of a person's body after death is a tremendous gift. Mason is grateful for everyone who expresses an interest in body donation. Attention to the following is appreciated.

1. Anatomical gifts to Mason must go through the established protocols of the Virginia State Anatomical Program (VSAP) of the Virginia Department of Health as required by Code of Virginia § 54.1-2825.
2. Potential donor must register with the Virginia State Anatomical Program (<https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/medical-examiner/vsap/vsap-forms/>) to be eligible.
3. Mason will work with the VSAP to coordinate body donation and transportation of the donor's body upon death to Mason's FSRTL.
4. Once received by Mason, the donor's body will be placed within Mason's secure FSRTL Facility in Manassas, Virginia for various forms of research and training in the study of body and skeletal modification. This research will provide foundational research and training opportunities to forensic anthropologists and health sciences professionals in understanding mechanisms of force to the body and skeleton.
5. The donor's remains will be subjected to VSAP serological testing for other contagious diseases; HIV, HCV, HBV, COVID -19, etc. to determine program eligibility.

6. If consented in the Body Donation Consent Form, the donor's remains may be subject to Human genome sequencing (DNA) analysis towards the aim of improving human identification methods. DNA research is very important in forensic science to improve the identification process of unknown individuals, but also has the potential to identify donor and the donor's family members. DNA analysis will not investigate predisposition of genetic disorders and the donor's information will be kept strictly confidential as Mason's FSRTL takes careful measures to protect the privacy of donors and their families. The FSRTL may also be asked to conduct human DNA research, however, all DNA studies must be approved by the Associate Director of the FSRTL. The donor providing consent to DNA testing will allow Mason to evaluate the donor's eligibility for this research. Declining DNA testing will not affect the donor's acceptance into the Body Donation Program or any other studies.
7. Donor's remains may be stored indefinitely at Mason for research, teaching, and training purposes. In the unlikely event that the FSRTL closes or otherwise ceases to exist, the donor's remains will be either donated to the Smithsonian or donated to another research or training facility. Mason will make every effort to notify my next of kin.
8. Mason **does not** return remains to the donor's next of kin. Skeletal remains are a very important component to Mason's research and teaching program. Once a donor's skeletal remains have been added to the FSRTL skeletal collection, they may be used for instruction in forensic and biological anthropology courses and research and training for professionals from around the world.
9. Research results may be shared with scientific and lay communities in the U.S. and across the globe.
10. In the unlikely event that Mason's FSRTL closes and ceases to operate, all skeletal remains will be either donated to the Smithsonian or donated to another research or training facility. Mason will maintain chain of custody and will make every effort to notify the next of kin about the disposition of the remains.
11. Mason reserves the right to decline a donation due to the condition of the body after death or because of issues with authorization. Mason will work within the parameters set forth for body donation by the Virginia State Anatomical Program. Should a potential donor be declined, the next of kin must assume responsibility for arrangements for disposition.
12. Official research, reports, and other published materials that incorporate donors' gifts will be recognized with the following, *"The authors are grateful to and acknowledge all donors to the George Mason University's Forensic Science Program."*
13. If you have any additional questions about Mason's Forensic Science Program or how Mason's body donation program works, please e-mail ([fscience@gmu.edu](mailto:fscience@gmu.edu)).

Please complete the following Body Donation Consent Form which requires witness signatures. Return it to Mason's Forensic Science Program ([fscience@gmu.edu](mailto:fscience@gmu.edu)) as an indication of your intent.

**Human Donor Program**  
Body Donation Consent Form

Anatomical gifts or donation are made to George Mason University pursuant to the established protocols of the Virginia State Anatomical Program (VSAP) of the Virginia Department of Health as required by Code of Virginia § 54.1-2825 and § § 32.1-291.2. - § 32.1-297.2.

**Donor Consent:**

I, the Donor, \_\_\_\_\_ (*name*), do hereby dispose of and give my body after my death to George Mason University, for use by the Forensic Science Program or its designee, for educational and research purposes. I also request, authorize, and instruct my surviving spouse, next of kin, my agent, or the physician who certifies my death to notify The State Virginia Anatomical Program (Telephone: (804) 786-2479), immediately after my death of the availability of my body.

OR

**Consent of donor's agent or next of kin (hereinafter Agent)**

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (*name*), being the Agent of:

\_\_\_\_\_ (Deceased Donor), do hereby dispose of and give the body of the Deceased Donor after their death to George Mason University, for use by its Forensic Science Program or its designee, for educational and research purposes. I have or will notify the State Virginia Anatomical Program (Telephone: (804) 786-2479), of the availability of the Deceased Donor's mortal remains.

I agree to the following:

1. I acknowledge receipt, have read and understand the Human Donor Program Terms & Conditions and FAQ's, incorporated herein by reference.
2. I approve and acknowledge that the donor's body may be used by George Mason University for scientific studies, education, and training as detailed in the Human Donor Program Terms & Conditions and FAQ's.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ (*Initial*) **If the body donation is approved and accepted by VSAP, I understand the remains will not be returned to Agent or legal next of kin or for burial.**
4. DNA Testing. Yes, I consent \_\_\_\_\_ / No I don't consent \_\_\_\_\_ to being considered for, and subject to, human DNA research.

Donor's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

The Donor signed the Body Donation Consent Form in our presence and we as attesting witnesses, at the request of the Donor and in his/her presence and in the presence of each other have also signed this document.

Witness Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Witness Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Witness Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Witness Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Next-of-Kin to sign either as a witness to Donor's Signature or as the Donor's Agent if donating someone else's body.**

Next-of-Kin Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Next-of-Kin Name Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_