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PRITZKER ADMINISTRATION ANNOUNCES REDUCTION IN STATE FORENSIC BACKLOG

Illinois State Police Releases Forensic Science Task Force Report

Springfield, IL – Illinois State Police (ISP) Director Brendan F. Kelly announced today the State has achieved a 33% overall reduction in the Biology/DNA forensic backlog. To further the backlog reduction, Governor JB Pritzker formed a Forensic Science Task Force in 2019 to make recommendations that address the challenges of forensic services. The task force is composed of 15 representatives from law enforcement, the defense bar, prosecutors, advocacy groups and more. Details on the reduction along with specific recommendations are included in a report submitted by the task force to the Illinois General Assembly. View the complete report <http://www.isp.state.il.us/docs/6-740%20-%20For%20Sci%20Draft%20Report%206-1-20.pdf>

“The many forensic initiatives we’ve begun during Governor Pritzker’s time in office are converging to produce real results. Our forensic scientists have done good work to reduce the backlog, and now is the time to redouble those efforts and continue the momentum to build up this increasingly important pillar of the justice system. These recommendations will strengthen our ability to seek justice for victims and ensure justice isn’t delayed,” ISP Director Brendan Kelly said. “As part of our continued efforts, the state must seek out improvements in training, procurement and justice system communication that are essential to the continued reduction of forensic backlogs.”

The reduction of forensic backlogs is a long-term challenge faced by crime laboratories across the country. Nationally, for every forensic assignment completed, another 1.2 are created. Backlogs are created in part by a greater demand by criminal justice stakeholders and the public for forensic testing, advancing technologies, including contact/touch DNA, submission of biology testing in property crimes, and resubmission of evidence in cases where certain types of testing was previously unavailable. Long term underinvestment in Illinois labs combined with a lack of access to the latest technology solutions compounded the problem.

Under Governor Pritzker’s leadership, the ISP Division of Forensic Services (DFS) has deployed technology to assist in the reductions of backlogs and turnaround times, implemented laboratory accountability measures, robotics, Rapid DNA, Lean Six-Sigma efficiencies, and hired and trained additional forensic scientists.

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ADD ONE/FORENSIC

Governor Pritzker's bi-partisan capital plan, the first in nearly a decade, allocated over \$50 million in critical laboratory infrastructure needed to rebuild forensic capacity. The preliminary result of these initiatives has been a 33% overall reduction in the Biology/DNA forensic backlog.

To provide transparency around further progress and improvements, ISP DFS also launched a publicly available web-based dashboard to provide information on processing times and backlogs. The dashboard is available online at <https://www.isp.state.il.us/forensics/statsdashboard.cfm>. The DFS will continue efforts to implement an online sexual assault tracking system by the end of 2020. Once implemented, the sexual assault tracking system will allow survivors of sexual assault to monitor their evidence online throughout the entire process, from collection at the hospital, through law enforcement pick-up and submission to the forensic lab, and lastly to the State's Attorney's office where final results are received.

The Forensic Science Task Force met nine times during COVID-19 and produced a report with the following goals and recommendations:

PERMANENT FORENSIC SCIENCE COMMISSION

The Task Force recommended the creation of a permanent 12-member Illinois Forensic Science Commission that includes key justice stakeholders. This commission will continue to make recommendations on education and training, procurement, funding and hiring. The permanent commission recommended by the task force represents a collaborative, systems-based approach that will allow our state's crime labs to continuously address the critical issues facing the evolving field of forensics and to be proactive in addressing the varied criminal justice policy, training, and procurement challenges outlined in this report that obstruct the improvement of forensic laboratory turn-around times.

IMPROVE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM COMMUNICATION TO REDUCE WASTE OF FORENSIC RESOURCES

Goal: Improve the communication between crime laboratories and the court system for the laboratory to have current information on the need for forensic analysis, or in the case of adjudication, plea or dismissal, return evidence to the proper law enforcement entity.

Recommendation: Each prosecutor's office, in conjunction with their local laboratory, should identify the best method to notify their laboratory of case dispositions. This may include submitting notifications through the laboratory management information system, or via email or phone.

DEVOTE MORE FORENSIC SCIENTIST TIME TO TESTING INSTEAD OF TESTIFYING

Goal: To address inefficient use of forensic scientists and trial delays.

Recommendation: Develop best practices on the potential use of remote testimony, consistent with the US and Illinois Constitutions, especially in the disciplines of drug chemistry and toxicology.

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STREAMLINE FORENSIC RESOURCES INFORMATION TO CRIMINAL JUSTICE STAKEHOLDERS THROUGH TRAINING

Goal: Reduce the amount of time lab personnel spend educating justice stakeholders on the same information so scientists are freed up to do testing and reduce submission of non-testable or non-probation evidence.

Recommendation: Offer pre-recorded webinar-based training done by local labs followed by live question and answer sessions.

- For police officers: training on best practices of 1) crime scene processing and 2) deciding what evidence should be sent to the lab is recommended.
- For prosecutors and defense attorneys: training on laboratory practices and forensic science basics is recommended.
- For judges: evidentiary training on foundational requirements for forensic science is recommended.

CREATE A CONTINUUM OF FORENSIC SCIENTIST TRAINING

Goal: Provide educational, research and professional training opportunities for current and future forensic scientists.

Recommendation: Partner with a university and create a forensic science curriculum devoted to providing educational, research and professional training opportunities for current and future forensic scientists and police officers. A “Forensic Science Institute” can address all aspects of forensic sciences, from evidence collection by crime scene investigators, preservation of evidence, analysis of evidence, forensic science reporting and courtroom testimony.

REFORM AND EXPEDITE PROCUREMENT

Goal: Identify obstacles to the acquisition of supplies, equipment, and services that are necessary for the effective delivery of timely forensic service by ISP crime laboratories and other publicly-funded laboratories.

Recommendation: Request the Executive Ethics Commission name a Chief Procurement Officer (CPO) exclusively for forensics that would be approved by the Commission. This CPO will be a fiscal watchdog over forensics, while having the technical understanding necessary to quickly advance forensic programs.

Director Kelly urged the implementation of the Task Force’s recommendations to further reduce forensic testing backlogs.

The mission of the ISP DFS is to deliver complete, accurate, and timely crime scene evidence collection and forensic analysis to every law enforcement agency within the state. With six laboratories and nearly 500 forensic services personnel, DFS completed more than 70,000 forensic assignments last year.