



HFSC Completes Comprehensive DNA Review of Backlogged Rape Kits *Houston Emerges as National Leader on the Issue*

February 23, 2015

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The Houston Forensic Science Center (HFSC) has completed a comprehensive in-house review of 6,663 sexual assault kits sent to external labs for testing, completing another milestone in the process to clear the backlog of untested rape kits that dated back to the early 1980s.

The project, which has served as a model for other cities around the country, was completed with funding and support from City of Houston Mayor Annise D. Parker, Houston Police Chief Charles A. McClelland Jr., the National Institute of Justice and a group of stakeholders who collaborated in a parallel research project to change how sexual assault investigations are handled.

“This was an extraordinary project that has had enormous impact on sexual assault victims,” said Irma Rios, director of HFSC’s Forensic Analysis Division.

“Our analysts spent hours reviewing these cases to ensure that no detail was missed and that the victims who had chosen to report this historically underreported crime would be treated with respect and have their chance for justice and closure. In addition, HFSC has worked with its partners to help ensure better responses in the future. We are proud of this project and of its outcomes,” Rios said.

Now that HFSC has completed the reviews, and put into the national DNA database _ CODIS _ all the relevant, useable DNA information, all cases that yield results will be

reviewed and potentially prosecuted by HPD and the Harris County District Attorney's Office. Overall, HFSC analysts conducted technical and administrative reviews of 3,030 kits in order to determine what could be entered into CODIS. Each review took on average two hours to complete. HFSC had more than 2,305 cases with profiles entered into CODIS, yielding more than 850 "hits," a return of about 35 percent. By using some of the DNA information found in the sexual assault kits and the CODIS matches, at least 29 new charges have been filed. Prosecutors are already taking some of those cases to court. So far, of the cases reviewed and where charges had been filed prior to testing, there have been no exonerations.

"This milestone is of special importance to survivors and their families and friends," said Mayor Parker. "However, it is also significant for the City of Houston, which is among the first in the country to eliminate its backlog of untested sexual assault kits."

Houston's approach to this national problem has been unique: here, stakeholders first came together _ with the help of a \$1.5 million National Institute of Justice grant _ to improve the response to how rapes are investigated and prosecuted, and to find ways to keep victims engaged to get better judicial outcomes and support by researching the results from the testing of 500 kits. Then, Houston's mayor took an additional step and decided to test all the sexual assault kits, contributing \$2.2 million of City funds that combined with another \$2.2 million in federal funding to cover the cost of this vast project. Overall, the project cost about \$5.9 million to complete.

That collaboration has led to changes in the process from start to finish. The research conducted by the University of Texas at Austin and Sam Houston State University has changed everything from what forensic evidence is collected from victims when they first arrive at a hospital to how cases are prosecuted in court. Each change has helped make the process more "victim-centered." For example, the Houston Police Department hired a Justice Advocate who is embedded in the Special Victims Division and acts as a liaison between investigators and victims. Moreover, the Houston Area Women's Center provided a full-time counselor to help survivors deal with the impacts of trauma and to provide support for survivors as they engaged, or re-engaged, with law enforcement through HPD's Justice Advocate.

“Our role and primary goal on this task force has always been to advocate for survivors and provide a safe and supportive environment where they can address the trauma that results from sexual violence,” said Sonia Corrales, Chief Program Officer for the Houston Area Women’s Center. “By providing a counselor who works directly with HPD’s Justice Advocate, we can ensure that survivors receive ongoing support, access to resources and are consistently treated as a priority as their cases are processed.”

The research by the universities has been crucial to making impactful change throughout the process.

“We are honored to be a part of the cultural shift that puts victims at the center, recognizes their trauma and promotes justice and holding offenders accountable,” said Noel Busch-Armendariz, director of the Institute of Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault at the University of Texas.

And the Houston Forensic Science Center no longer waits for police to request testing for a rape kit. Instead, in line with Texas law, HFSC picks up rape kits weekly from the HPD Property Room and automatically tests everything. Police and prosecutors have changed how they interview victims, and have also undergone training to better understand the impact trauma has on memory. This has changed the questions prosecutors might pose at trial, and the way cases are presented to a jury.

And while some of these newly tested cases may be too old to prosecute due to the statute of limitations on such crimes _ some date back to 1984 _ police and prosecutors are finding the test results can still help in the sentencing phase of a trial or in parole hearings.

Now, as many jurisdictions nationwide, struggle with a similar backlog, Houston is in a position to help others deal with the issue in an efficient manner. Project participants cannot only teach practical, efficient ways of handling thousands of cases simultaneously, but also share the knowledge that has been gathered about victims and how to better engage them.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

Ramit Plushnick-Masti

Public Information Officer

media@houstonforensicscience.org

713-929-6768