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ILLINOIS STATE POLICE IMPROVEMENTS YIELD **REDUCTION OF DNA BACKLOG**

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. –Illinois State Police (ISP) Director Brendan F. Kelly, along with Division of Forensic Services’ Deputy Director Col. Sean Cormier and Assistant Deputy Director Robin Woolery appeared today before the Illinois Senate’s Public Health Committee to discuss the DNA backlog.

During the meeting, Director Kelly offered this testimony: “The Illinois State Police Forensic laboratory system is one of the largest in the country, the only system in the nation that serves both an entire state and a massive metropolis like Chicago, providing forensic support for all police departments in Illinois. ISP labs have been leaders in DNA forensics going back to the 1980s but have not been exempt from the challenge of DNA backlogs affecting labs across the United States. That challenge essentially has been that for every 1 DNA assignment completed, 1.2 are created in this country.

While many cases are not decided by forensics and many criminal charges can often move forward with zero forensic evidence, victims, prosecutors, law enforcement, community leaders and this body have rightly called for answers to this challenge. For years, members of this body have called for the ISP to act on numerous fronts, and I’m heartened to be able to tell you that each of those demands are systemically and comprehensively being met.

First, as a result of the implementation of LIMS, the laboratory information management system, we finally have real and reliable data to measure and hold each lab, each forensic scientist and ISP leadership accountable for timely results.

Second, the Senate years ago asked for a sexual assault kit tracking system online to show where each kit is – from hospitals, to law enforcement, to labs, to the courts. After navigating the state procurement and contracts process, a vendor contract has been signed and that site is now in development and with the support of DoIT will be executed this year in compliance with state law. The ISP is already posting forensic stats online and the additional transparency that will come with the online tracking system is already motivating criminal justice stakeholders to improve outcomes even before it’s online.

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Third, the Senate called upon the ISP years ago to conduct an independent, Lean Six Sigma analysis of the forensic system from start to finish to reduce abuse, waste, inefficiencies and lag time contributing to the forensic backlog. Under this administration, in 2019, that is now done. And now our scientists have already begun the implementation phase of those recommendations and Deputy Director Cormier and Assistant Deputy Director Woolery will share the specifics of that work, much of which comes from the suggestions and creativity of our own forensic scientists.

Fourth, this body called upon the ISP to procure the instrumentation for what is called Rapid DNA. Again, done. We can provide further information on the potential and limitations of that technology and how the ISP is putting ourselves in the best position to be able expand the use of rapid DNA – specifically with Ande – when the FBI ultimately permits broader forensic use.

In addition, again after navigating the state’s procurement and contract process, the use of high through-put TECAN robotics is being expanded, with the first sample batches being processed in November of last year and training in the Chicago, Joliet and Springfield labs conducted in December. The ISP is very excited about the impact we will see as a result of robotics this year.

Also, the necessary commitment of infrastructure capital and human capital has finally been made. The ISP is grateful for the Governor’s support and for the bipartisan support by the Senate of the 2020 budget, which included additional headcount for forensic scientists and for the capital bill which included \$120 million for the ISP.

Twenty-two new forensic scientists hired last year are completing training and 24 additional forensic scientists are beginning training this year. That moves us closer to optimal staffing but is just the first year in a many year process to rebuild the ranks of our forensic scientists which were devastated by budget crisis after budget crisis and which face an imminent retirement bubble as a result of absorbing the Chicago city lab system.

The training time for forensic scientists before starting actual work in biology has traditionally been 24 months but we are piloting a fast track program this year that will be more on-the-job training, allowing them to work assignments on the backlog within only a year. The budget has also allowed us to make improvements to crime scene investigations – the critical gateway to the forensics process.

And building a new lab in the Will County area is the top capital project we are working on with the Capital Development Board and moving forward with feasibility studies for potential sites.

In short, for our part, ISP forensic services are now moving forward on all fronts.

Last year, 69 biology/DNA section forensic scientists completed 13,793 assignments in one year.

As a result of the hard work and leadership of our forensic sciences team, the increase in assignment completion rates is finally outpacing the increase in assignments being created.

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And last, but not least, the backlog went down 16% since last year. Things are finally going the right way.

This is not a white paper or a report on a shelf. This is real, steady, solid work that is crucial to criminal and social justice. And with all the additional improvements our folks are working on, they are just getting started!

There continue to be significant impacts on forensic turnaround time outside the walls of the lab involving investigations, the courts and evolving training, techniques and standards of evidence and that's why the Governor has created a forensic sciences task force – 15 distinguished members just named yesterday – which will develop and make evidence based recommendations to this body, the courts and all criminal justice stakeholders to make sure we don't see this kind of problem happen again. Increased communications with investigators and prosecutors are already reducing waste of our lab resources.

Backlog and age of cases are one measure that we are improving within the lab system but the ultimate goal for all criminal justice stakeholders is that justice is never waiting on forensics whether it's an unsolved cold case, a hot investigation, a case ready for trial, or post-conviction claims of innocence.”

During her testimony, Assistant Deputy Director Woolery addressed the 70 unsolved Chicago homicide cases with DNA evidence at the lab that were discussed in a previous committee meeting. She told the committee that testing had been completed on all but two of the cases. Those two are currently in testing. Four of those cases were waiting for court action to do the testing.

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