

Illinois State Police Announces 48 Percent Reduction In DNA/Biology Backlog Since March 2019

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SPRINGFIELD – Governor JB Pritzker and Illinois State Police (ISP) Director Brendan F. Kelly announced today the ISP Division of Forensic Services (DFS) achieved a 48% overall reduction in Biology/DNA pending assignments, commonly known as “the DNA backlog.” On March 1, 2019, the backlog consisted of 9,289 pending assignments. As of Nov. 30, 2020, forensic scientists worked the number of pending assignments down to 4,857.

“Since the beginning of my administration, we have prioritized implementing policies and procedures that will allow the dedicated forensics team at ISP’s Division of Forensic Services to reduce the state’s DNA backlog. Thanks to the leadership of the Forensic Science Task Force, which my administration established in 2019, additional recommendations to help further decrease the backlog are now underway,” said Governor JB Pritzker. “I am encouraged by the 48% reduction in forensic cases and will continue to support ISP’s work to bring brings victims and their loved ones a step closer to justice.”

“For more than a decade, trends in forensic labs across the country, including in Illinois, have been headed the wrong direction, but because of the hard work and discipline of the Illinois State Police we are finally headed in the right direction in Illinois,” said ISP Director Brendan F. Kelly. “Our progress is real and significant, but no one in the Illinois State Police will be satisfied until all victims can trust that the cause of justice will be advanced and not delayed by forensics.”

Remarkably, this reduction was achieved while having up to six forensic scientists from the biology/DNA section on loan for more than four months to the Illinois Department of Public Health to assist with COVID-19 testing.

Forensics outcomes across a variety of metrics have significantly improved.

This year, the average age of pending DNA/Biology assignments has been reduced from 247 in May 2019 to 110 days in November 2020.

The number of DNA/Biology assignments that are older than a year was 1,329 in January 2020 but had dropped to 186 in November 2020.

The number of pending sexual assault assignments that are more than six months old has gone from 1,059 in January to 280 in November 2020.

The DNA/Biology section is completing 22% more assignments per month this year compared with 2019.

These outcomes were achieved in part by executing a multi-prong strategy:

The ISP DFS has deployed technology to assist in the reduction of backlogs and turnaround times, implemented laboratory accountability measures, robotics, Rapid DNA, Lean Six-Sigma efficiencies and hired and trained additional forensic scientists. The ISP Laboratory system implemented robotics to increase DNA casework capacity in November 2019. Robotics are now fully operational and are contributing to the backlog and turnaround time in DNA analysis.

To improve communication, ISP DFS began issuing agency specific reports on pending assignments to enhance communication between investigating agencies, state’s attorneys’ offices and the laboratories. Agencies are asked to review their list of pending assignments and tell lab management of any cases that need immediate attention and

those that no longer require analysis. For example, this process identified 1,200 felony drug cases closed with a court disposition while still showing pending assignments at the lab. As a result, lab resources were not squandered on testing these 1,200 closed cases. This communication has and will continue to improve the prioritization of casework and reduce the waste of lab resources.

As part of the plan to reduce the number of pending assignments, the ISP DFS implemented an aggressive hiring plan and continues to work to recruit and hire scientists, as well as implementing training that is effective and safe during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the beginning of 2019, ISP DFS has held two Forensic Science Trainee classes. Even with the difficulties navigating through the pandemic, ISP DFS has been able to keep training on track. The 2020 trainees are scheduled to complete their training between March 2021 and February 2022.

Additionally, Gov. Pritzker's Forensic Science Task Force, chaired by ISP Director Kelly, continued to meet during the pandemic and made additional, specific recommendations that, if implemented, will sustain the momentum of reducing the backlog and improving turnaround times.

The ISP DFS will also move into a new laboratory in Decatur, occupying roughly 12,000 square feet in the first two stories of the building. The ISP DFS will utilize this as a DNA lab, initially processing evidence submitted from property crimes. The addition of this lab will allow the further reduction in turnaround times. Funding for the construction of a new forensics lab in the Joliet area was also secured under Gov. Pritzker's bi-partisan capital bill and is moving forward under the Capital Development Board.

The ISP DFS unveiled the sexual assault kit tracking system, known as Checkpoint, before the statutory deadline. This system allows sexual assault survivors to track their evidence in real time from collection at the hospital to law enforcement pick-up and submission to the forensic lab and lastly, to the prosecutors' office.

The ISP's success in decreasing the forensic backlog are not limited to the Biology /DNA section.

The latent print backlog was slashed by 35% this year and 78% since January 2019. Average turnaround time for fingerprints this year has been reduced by 62% since 2019. Average turnaround time for firearms evidence this year has been reduced by 44% since 2019.

The trace chemistry section is completing 49% more assignments per month than last year.