

Our crime lab is humming again

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You may remember that the state forensic crime lab in Meriden, understaffed and mismanaged, had in 2011 built up one of nation's largest backlogs of unprocessed crime-scene evidence. It had also failed two federal audits and lost its professional accreditation. In response, the FBI locked the lab out of the national DNA database. Posting crime-scene samples to that national DNA index is one of the most important functions of any American crime lab.

In late 2012, Guy Vallaro, a respected forensic scientist and director who ran the crime lab in Massachusetts, was brought here to rescue the Connecticut lab. The backlog of DNA cases in early 2013, including murder, rape, and aggravated assault, stood at 6,000. Vallaro, with 30 years experience, predicted it would take several years to make a significant dent in the backlog.

It has taken a little more than one. The backlog now stands at 2,400 cases, and consists mostly of less serious property crimes. There were 2,893 backed-up sexual-assault cases in January 2013; now there's 312. As a result, police are able to move faster on felony investigations and the lab, which won back its access to the FBI database, is posting samples to the offender index and getting "hits" at a far higher rate than it was two years ago. A "hit" is a match between the sample and an offender whose DNA is on file. Each hit gives the police a potential suspect. The latent-print and ballistic entries have also markedly increased.

"The staff has been remarkable," Vallaro, who has a doctorate in pharmaceutical sciences and toxicology, said Friday.

Here's how and why the lab, so crucial to justice in Connecticut, is digging out of the hole.

The lab was once on top of the profession and widely viewed as cutting-edge; that is to say, the man who basically founded the lab, Dr. Henry C. Lee, was looked at that way.

As DNA sleuthing evolved, Lee carried the lab along on his back. It didn't matter that the lab had to answer to a state police major and colonel. On the strength of Lee's gall and willpower, and the science he was practicing, the lab was respected by the defense as much as the prosecution.

Then Lee moved on — and the lab, which had been understaffed, began to collapse. Caseloads grew; the backlogs grew faster. Homicide evidence and rape-test kits from sexual assault cases piled up. Defense lawyers began to question results of cases that were turning on DNA evidence.

Cut to Massachusetts. Vallaro was running the state police crime lab and Gov. Deval Patrick had asked him to clean up a mess at the toxicology lab at the Massachusetts health department. Transgressions by a chemist there had tainted drug cases for municipal police departments. So Vallaro took over the lab.

Meanwhile, a state taskforce of law officers, defense lawyers and others was formed to stop the bleeding at the Connecticut lab. One of the first things the panel did was to restrict the amount of evidence that police could submit to the lab for testing in non-violent cases. That cut the incoming flow of work by a significant margin and created breathing room. The panel put out a nationwide request for a new director. Vallaro applied and was chosen from a pool of highly qualified people. It would be the first time since Lee that the crime lab had a doctorate-level scientist at the helm.

At the same time, the panel increased staffing at the lab by 25 percent, and pulled it out of the state police chain of command. The lab was placed into its own division in the state Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection, which includes the state police. Vallaro would report directly to the commissioner.

Then Vallaro got to work. What he saw were DNA scientists making calls on individual cases to the investigating police officers. "Was there a suspect?" the scientists were asking. If there was, then more DNA would need to be taken from that suspect, since the tests at the lab would consume the sample. Also, if DNA evidence is going to be used up, then the defense has the right to come in and view the test.

Anyway, Vallaro knew that the relatively high-paid state scientists shouldn't be playing phone tag with cops when there was backed-up homicide evidence to process. Vallaro also noticed that the scientists were prepping their own DNA samples for testing. There was a forensic biology section that should have been evaluating all the evidence and preparing the swabs and

slides, but for some reason, that unit was doing the prep work in only about half the cases. And when the scientists were done with a case, they'd have to go search for the next one to do. They were not assigned a caseload.

So Vallaro set up a team that did nothing but call the investigating police departments when evidence came in and got all the information needed on each case. He fixed it so the forensic biology unit is preparing the DNA samples for the scientists — allowing them to get right to the testing work. He assigned cases to each scientist, with the expectation that they complete a certain number each month. Their production was tracked.

The work flow quickened. The restrictions on the amount of evidence the police could submit in non-violent cases also helped considerably, as did the added staff, and the immediate access to the commissioner.

Momentum has continued to build. Some of the new staff members, including a group of firearms and ballistic examiners, are about to complete training and begin to tackle cases. That will help to further reduce the backlog.

At the low point a couple of years ago, "it was a rough time for the staff that was here," Vallaro said. "There was a black cloud. It has lifted, but there's a lot more to do. Digging out from what was here is difficult and taking all of our resources."

Vallaro has added deputy directors and quality-assurance managers. They keep things tight and moving every day. But there's another reason. Call it "fighting the Henry Lee effect."

"If I was to fall off the face of the earth, this place would go on," said Vallaro. "It is not all built on the director. No one individual is indispensable."