



Criminalistics Section – 2005

B60 Forensic Science and Homeland Security: A Critical Piece of the Puzzle

Barry A.J. Fisher, MS, MBA, Scientific Services Bureau, Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, 2020 West Beverly Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA 90057*

State and local crime labs, for the most part, are unprepared to provide assistance in terrorism acts or mass casualty incidents.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by providing attendees with a clearer understanding that State and local crime labs are not part of a nation preparedness strategy. Attendees will also receive suggestions on how to remedy this situation in their home regions.

Suppose terrorists mount coordinated attacks across the United States and abroad striking many targets simultaneously. Historically, the FBI, FEMA, D-MORT teams, and other organizations provide assistance to local agencies during disasters with or without mass casualties. But what would happen if the federal response were stretched so thin that local jurisdictions were on their own for a few days or longer? Naturally, the "locals" would fend for themselves and manage as best as they could.

A serious problem exists today. There is no defined role for State and local crime labs who employ thousands of trained scientists throughout the United States in the event of a terrorist incident. Despite their wide use in other areas, local crime labs have largely been ignored as an added resource for homeland security related incidents. The result is that few state or local crime labs are prepared to help out should an incident occur. The idea that forensic science personnel might be among the first responders or support first responders has not been fully considered. Developing a local forensic science response to a terrorist incident while it is unfolding is not the appropriate time to start planning.

While crime labs do not have the capacity to specifically handle certain types terrorist incidents as certain Federal agencies they, none-theless, in a WMD scenario, they will play a role, whether they are prepared or not. The events in New York City following September 11, 2001, demonstrate this when the NYC Office of the Chief Medical Examiner conducted thousands of DNA tests for victim identification.

State and local public safety personnel will be involved with pre and post terrorist events. It is no leap to expect local forensic science personnel to also be involved as either first responders or immediately following the first responders. They could be involved at the scene and in the laboratory as examiners of physical evidence in traditional forensic science efforts such as, DNA testing, latent fingerprint examination, handwriting examination, and so on.

Before forensic scientist show up at a scene or become involved, careful consideration will be given concerning chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear contamination of evidence, analysis of large volumes of evidence, tracking evidence, coordinating information, training and preparedness.

To date, federal planners that would ultimately manage terrorist incidents have not considered what might be the appropriate role for State and local forensic science laboratories in terrorist incidents. Other than medical examiners and coroners, there have there been few attempts to prepare local forensic practitioners for this assignment.

What are appropriate steps that might be taken to remedy the present situation? Just as the Department of Health and Human Services has brought state and local public health labs together under a "laboratory response network" an appropriate federal agency should bring together state and local crime labs along with homeland security stakeholders to develop a role for state and local forensic science laboratories and begin planning how to use these resources.

A national forum is one way to define the relationship of forensic science to homeland security. Some of the issues that might be discussed include: the identification of mass casualties by DNA; the examining WMD contaminated evidence at the crime lab; the coordination of local crime labs with state and local public health labs; training and equipping forensic science personnel; and integrating forensic science into WMD preparations.

State and local crime labs can also begin preparations now by contacting local stakeholders concerned with terrorism and mass casualty planning. Sometimes it takes the prodding of the "locals" to get the "fed" moving. And now would certainly be a good time to begin, before the next incident occurs.

Terrorism, Homeland Security, Mass Casualties