



E62 Houston's Approach: A Final Outcome to the National Problem of Untested Sexual Assault Kits

Irma Rios, MBA, Houston Forensic Science Center, 1200 Travis, 24th Fl, Houston, TX 77002*

After attending this presentation, attendees will get an intimate look at one major city's multidisciplinary, victim-centric approach to testing more than 6,660 rape kits dating back to the early 1980s and the final outcome of processing such a vast number of kits from the perspective of the laboratory, the victims, and different areas of the justice system. Attendees will also become familiar with the project's emerging themes, its challenges, and the ultimate reward of completing what appeared to be an unsurmountable goal.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by increasing awareness of the benefit of taking a multidisciplinary approach when eliminating a backlog of untested sexual assault kits. It will also improve the response to victims of sexual assault and provide forensic laboratories with information concerning the challenges and workflows required to effectively and efficiently review kits sent for testing at private laboratories.

Backlogged and untested sexual assault kits are a national problem. Many cities have been painted as unresponsive to sexual assault victims. Crime laboratories are under-resourced. Community advocates are stretched thin. Officers have more than their share of calls for service. District attorneys have high caseloads. The impact to these entities when mandated to process all sexual assault kits can be stressful.

The City of Houston, like many others in the news recently, was under the microscope for having a large volume of untested sexual assault kits. For years, Houston's system relied on investigators submitting a request for a rape kit to be tested. Without such a request, the laboratory may not have even known that there was a kit. At times, police didn't request testing because a victim wasn't cooperating, the statute of limitations had expired, consent was a question in the case, or the district attorney refused to issue an indictment.

The National Institute of Justice gave the City of Houston funds to study and address untested sexual assault kits. It was this funding, coupled with city dollars and the passage of a state law in 2011, that led Houston to test all the kits.

The technical reviews and Combined DNA Index System (CODIS) uploads for approximately 6,663 untested kits were completed in February 2015. This was a remarkable achievement. Several themes emerged. Changes have been implemented in response, and the city, along with its police department, prosecutors, and Houston Forensic Science Center (HFSC), have learned that the benefits of testing all kits outweighed the costs. Victim voices will be heard, and long-standing crimes, sometimes crossing state boundaries, will be solved. Sexual assault is a complex crime and requires a cultural shift across the justice system to respond more effectively. This presentation will summarize the strategies that make a multidisciplinary team successful and improve response to rape victims. The strategies presented can be adapted to other municipalities and regions across the country.

Multidisciplinary, Victim-Centric, Untested SAKs