

## **Outstanding Partnership: Intergovernmental Cooperation**

### **Consolidated City and County Forensic Laboratory Yields Cost Savings and Boosts Effectiveness**

Forensic science in public safety work is an expensive yet necessary element in solving crimes. The prevalence of a half-dozen popular television shows dealing with forensics has educated the public and increased their expectations of rapid, precise and accurate science. Such expectations may exceed capabilities when departments are faced with limited budgets, laboratory space and trained staff. When citizen expectations exceed the ability to provide service, nobody wins.

Long before *Crime Scene Investigation* aired on the networks, the Public Safety Department of the City of Kalamazoo and the Kalamazoo County Sheriff's Department began discussing the possibility of consolidating their laboratories and sharing personnel so that they could increase their level of service and achieve accurate scientific results. Better science and faster results would speed case movement through the courts. At the time, the city lab was cramped and lacked the safety equipment necessary for many critical tests. There was no room for expansion in a building that was literally falling apart. The county lab also lacked space and equipment. Both needed upgrades.

Possibilities were inked into plans when the City of Kalamazoo began construction of its new public safety headquarters in 2000. A consolidated forensics lab was included in the plans, based on input of both the city and county. By adding county funding to the construction of the facility, more equipment could be purchased. When the new crime lab opened in April 2003 at Kalamazoo's Arthur Washington Crosstown Center, new forensic equipment and facilities were installed, such as:

- *A \$86,000 micro fourier transform infra red spectrometer* – Neither department could have purchased this equipment on its own. The FTIR instrument identifies substances and allows rapid and precise matching of evidence, such as a single fiber or strand of hair.
- *Explosive and toxic isolation systems* – The laboratory was specially designed to protect other personnel in the building, providing maximum protection in the event of any mishap.
- *Ten fume hoods* – Persons who work with toxic chemicals at a laboratory bench understand how important fume hoods are for safety and health. With only one hood in the old laboratory, the amount of work conducted had to be limited for safety's sake. The 10 new fume hoods ensure the safety of the technicians and increase by tenfold the number of tests that can be conducted at one time.
- *A \$10,000 Misonix superglue chamber* – Kalamazoo County is in the process of purchasing this equipment, a heat chamber in which latent fingerprints can be detected. City crime lab technicians will have access to the equipment.

While it is premature to see the complete level of cost savings by this joint venture, the community has benefited from rapid processing of laboratory results. The staff and equipment were put to the test during a high profile homicide in 2004. Identification of the murder suspect was obtained from evidence in 24 hours. The suspect was returned to the area, tried and convicted in months. Staff say this would not have been possible without the current lab. Previously, evidence would have been sent to a federal agency for testing, taking weeks or months. The trail of the suspect could have gone cold in the interim.

Crime Lab Technician Karianne Thomas has double-checked the validity of the lab results by sending samples of evidence to the Federal Bureau of Investigation to see if the agency results are the same as those of the Crime Lab. In all cases when this has been done, the results have proved identical.

Another increase in efficiency has been seen in drug testing. Persons held on suspicion of illegal drug sales or use are detained rather than released, pending test results. Due to staffing by both the city and county, drug testing results have a turnaround time of minutes rather than days. This frees officers from having to bring in suspects a second time.

Two jurisdictions working together has boosted productivity. Recently a homicide and an unrelated multiple shooting incident occurred on the same night at two separate locations within the city. The city sent one team of forensic specialists to the shooting site. At the homicide location, county evidence technicians processed the inside of the building where the crime occurred while the city team processed the outside. Pooling their findings, they were able to reconstruct the crime scene. Prior to the consolidation, this rapid and intense response could not have happened – personnel would have been spread too thin.

From these results, it's clear that the lab consolidation is making a positive impact. Frustration of making do with less is gone. There is a pride in being able to do a job well. All are eager to work with the new equipment and share results. There is no territorialism among the staff. Lieutenant Marty Johnson from the Kalamazoo County Sheriff's Department manages the lab. He is assisted by Sergeant Jim Dunlop, also from the Sheriff's Department. Because the Sheriff's headquarters is located several miles from the Crosstown Center location, his job was added to coordinate the county employees now assigned to the lab. Also working in the lab are

six crime lab technicians from Kalamazoo Public Safety and a specialist from the sheriff's department.

Two jurisdictions working together for a common cause – solving crimes and improving the safety and security of citizens – is successfully in place in Kalamazoo.