

“EVERY 107 SECONDS ANOTHER AMERICAN IS SEXUALLY ASSAULTED”: WE HAVE AN OBLIGATION

Panel: Norman Gahn (*Milwaukee County District Attorney’s Office – retired*), Jeffrey Nye (*Michigan State Police*), Cecelia Crouse (*Palm Beach Sheriff’s Office*), Julie Weil, Its Not Just Me Foundation

There have been over 2,000,000 articles published over the past two decades on the issue of sexual assault evidence stored in law enforcement agency evidence vaults throughout the United States. The number of untested sexual assault cases has been estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands although nationally evidence custodians struggle to locate and account for each untested kit. Federal, State and Local government budgets and grants have awarded law enforcement agencies millions of dollars in funding to have all backlogged sexual assault evidence tested and eligible DNA profiles entered into the Combined DNA Index System (CODIS). The end result of laboratory bench testing of sexual assault evidence may be a CODIS eligible DNA profile but this is only a part of the process. Policies and practices for handling sexual assault cases starting with the assault to the conclusion of the case are critical components of addressing this complicated process. There have been several comprehensive national sexual assault kit backlog reports that identify the need for a holistic approach when designing a sexual assault evidence testing process. Reports and grants encourage the design and implementation of a process that includes involvement of forensic medical personnel, victim advocates, law enforcement, the forensic laboratory, prosecutors and defense attorneys for the purpose of obtaining justice for victims. The panel discussion will summarize the response of law enforcement, forensic laboratories and victim advocates on universal issues including conducting a census of property evidence vaults to determine the scale of the problem, identifying causal factors why sexual assault kits are not submitted for testing, development of a process whereby every sexual assault kit is tested, ensuring open communication with the victim and the realities of the Combined DNA Index System database as investigative aide.