

What Your Crime Lab Can Do For You

This issue of Forensic Magazine is dedicated to facilities – crime labs, medical examiner's office, and the like. So what's that got to do with the crime scene folks? More than you may realize.

As a crime scene officer, you do not work in isolation; you are simply the first step in the journey from crime to conviction. You know that the evidence you collect gets analyzed at the lab, but ask yourself the following questions:

- What can your crime lab do for you?
- What are the capabilities of your crime lab?
- What new technology has your crime lab recently acquired?

If you can't answer these questions, how do you know what to collect, how much to collect, and how to collect it? An understanding of what your lab is capable of can make you smarter about how you process a crime scene.

Keep up with the technology your lab has and determine how that changes your job. Money is being invested in crime labs every day. Keep up to date with what your lab can do.

Know what your lab can process. For example, how about dust footprints, hair, fibers, and fingerprints? If you don't know your lab has the ability to process these, you may not even gather this type of evidence.

Know how your lab processes evidence. Think about the days when you had to collect a DNA sample the size of a quarter. Today, in some case, you cannot even visually detect the sample amount needed for DNA testing.

A little knowledge goes a long way. Speak to the latent and DNA people at the lab. Know how you can help them. What issues is the lab seeing in terms of your work: contamination, packing, etc.? Understanding the lab's procedures can help you do your job better.

Often, expertise exists in the lab that you don't have on your local force. For example, bring in a blood stain expert to help you chart the scene. The crime lab has lots of resources for their own investigations. Use them.

Education, knowledge, networking, and training. These are things that will help make you most effective as a crime scene officer. Talk to your crime lab folks, read what you can on what's up and coming not only in terms of the scene, but also the lab. Attend conferences. Many local IAI divisions hold meetings that are cost effective to attend yet a tremendous avenue for networking.

Be smart. Work together with your lab and your fellow forensic specialists. We're all in this together.

