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## Local police may get their own crime lab

DAVID HENCH Staff Writer --. *Portland Press Herald* [Portland, Me] 20 Nov 2007: pp. A.1.

### Abstract (summary)

Six communities and Cumberland County say they are poised to establish a regional crime laboratory that would improve forensic analysis and foster greater coordination among police departments.

### Full Text

Six communities and Cumberland County say they are poised to establish a regional crime laboratory that would improve forensic analysis and foster greater coordination among police departments.

The group plans to finalize the cost of the cooperative effort by the end of next month so that municipalities can include it in their budgeting for next year.

Portland, South Portland, Westbrook, Scarborough, Falmouth and Cape Elizabeth would be joined by Cumberland County in the effort, which would let the police agencies share expertise and the cost of expensive, state-of-the-art equipment.

Authorities say they will do a better job of catching and prosecuting criminals if they can get more evidence and process it faster than they do now by relying on their own small crime laboratories or the state police.

"The strength of crime-scene forensics is, we're now able to glean greater amounts of information from a given crime scene by using the technology available to us," said Portland Police Chief Tim Burton. "The investment in these technologies and developing the capacity to use them is expensive. It only makes sense for us to share these technologies."

The facility would be built within the Portland Police Department for about \$1.5 million, which would cover the cost of converting the department's former gymnasium into two floors of working space. The group's yearly payments would total about \$112,000.

Participants also would contribute to equipment costs totaling about \$19,000 per year. The costs would be apportioned by population, with the county paying for the communities for which it provides law enforcement. The plan does not call for additional staffing.

"We have agreed as to the necessity of doing this and the urgency of it," said Cumberland County Commissioner Richard Feeney.

County officials had been hesitant to sign on, for financial reasons, but decided last week that there would be an important public safety benefit, in part because the state crime laboratory in Augusta gets backed up with work.

"They are being so overwhelmed, there is a real-time lag getting a response back from the state," Feeney said. "By having it here locally, there's going to be a real quicker turnaround time."

The laboratory is not meant to replace the use of the state police facility, which is run by the state Department of Public Safety and would still do the most advanced work, such as developing DNA profiles. But the local unit would ease the strain on the state laboratory for other types of analysis and would ensure consistency in the way evidence is prepared for state analysis, Burton said.

Communities would still do most of their own forensic work, but would be able to draw on the expertise of other offices. Some departments have officers who are trained in computer crimes or using alternative light sources to identify various fluids. In the future, an officer might specialize in ballistics analysis and lend that expertise to other departments.

"For the first time, we will have all the expertise under one roof," said Cumberland County Sheriff Mark Dion.

Members of the Metro Coalition, which represents the six communities, have endorsed the plan. The proposal still needs final approval in each of the communities, said Portland City Councilor James Cohen, who has led the Metro Coalition effort.

"I think everybody's hopeful this project will be successful and it can serve as a blueprint for successful collaboration," he said.

The coalition would invite some other communities to join the regional laboratory, which would further reduce the cost to participants.

Because criminals often strike in multiple communities, for example, advances in forensic analysis by one community will benefit its neighbors, proponents say.

"Crime knows no boundaries in terms of community and county, therefore we feel anybody who could benefit from this could be well-served by participating," said Paul McKenney, a supporter who is president of the Greater Portland Council of Governments and chairman of the Cape Elizabeth Town Council.

He expects that other communities will participate to take advantage of the latest in crime-fighting technology.

"The technology keeps changing, and if you don't keep up with it you're not going to have the best evidence," McKenney said. "Good evidence processing means a better track record of prosecuting criminals."

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### Illustration

Caption: 2006 Press Herald file Cumberland County Deputy Sheriff Josh Potvin demonstrates the use of an alternative light source and filter glasses to view fingerprints on a handgun.

### Indexing (details)

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