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Conclusive evidence: Lab a big help

Hench, David. *Portland Press Herald* [Portland, Me] 27 Aug 2009: pp. A.1.

Abstract (summary)

[...] this summer, a state-of-the-art automated fingerprint analysis system purchased as part of the new regional crime lab was able to instantly compare the print to prints from all known offenders in a greater Portland database.

Full Text

One morning in July, 2007, a worker at Dee's Ice Cream on St. John Street arrived to find a window open and the cash drawer empty.

Police recovered a fingerprint from the cash drawer but had no suspects and no practical way to compare the print with every potential burglar they knew.

"We had nothing," said Det. Joe Fagone. The case languished.

But this summer, a state-of-the-art automated fingerprint analysis system purchased as part of the new regional crime lab was able to instantly compare the print to prints from all known offenders in a greater Portland database. Police identified the suspect - who also was linked to burglaries in the West End - and also learned he is already in the Maine State Prison until 2013 for another burglary conviction.

The fingerprint analysis system is just one example of the forensic technology that Greater Portland communities will now have access to, having banded together to form the Metropolitan Regional Crime Laboratory.

Portland Police Chief James Craig welcomed police officials and other representatives from each of the communities Wednesday to the city's police station for the formal opening of the facility, housed in the station's third floor.

Nine communities pitched in to help construct and equip the \$1.5 million facility, each paying a portion based on its population.

"It would make no sense for Cape Elizabeth to make an investment in a big crime lab individually," said Cape Elizabeth Town Manager Michael McGovern. "The equipment costs a lot of money and it just makes so much more sense to purchase it once."

The regional facility also puts detectives from different departments in the same area, able to share information about ongoing cases that may be related.

The project has been in the works for three years. Former Portland Mayor James Cohen jump-started the political collaboration needed for the project and former Portland Police Chief Tim Burton oversaw the development and implementation of the plan.

Portland Deputy Chief Joe Loughlin said the lab represents a major leap forward in an area that was rudimentary, at best, when his career started.

"We had pretty much a high school chemistry crime lab at the time," he said. Now, the lab will make available several advanced forensic techniques to all of the area departments, helping solve crimes that might otherwise remain open, he said.

Much of the lab's benefit is in the nitty gritty of evidence processing that never makes the television crime dramas.

Bloody clothing must be dried in a ventilation controlled environment to avoid contamination, said Sgt. Robert Martin, head of Portland's evidence technicians. Dangerous chemicals used in preserving fingerprints, for example, are applied within an apparatus which prevents officers from being exposed.

Individual evidence processing rooms and secure lockers mean officers can start work on evidence and then if called away, lock it up until they can return for later analysis.

Each department will have access to equipment they could not afford on their own, systems like the roughly \$30,000 fingerprint analysis computer, which automatically identifies key features on a fingerprint image and matches them against a database of samples. The system was delivered in June and already has found 21 matches between crime-scene fingerprints and those in a database of known offenders.

A \$25,000 device is used to subject bed linens and clothing to different wavelengths of light that makes blood and semen visible through special goggles.

Specialized equipment for digital photography and enhancement will help officers "see" evidence in ways they otherwise could not.

An \$8,000 portable alternative light source will permit agencies to use the light to find trace evidence at crime scenes rather than just in the lab.

The lab won't do its own DNA analysis - that will still be done at the State Police crime lab in Augusta - but will help process and preserve evidence to make DNA analysis more effective.

The departments also can share expertise. Portland's evidence technicians have had several opportunities to use acid and other chemicals to restore seemingly obliterated serial numbers on guns.

The technology will allow several departments access to the best that each of them has, said Capt. Don Goulet, of the Cumberland County Sheriff's Office, one of the few departments like Portland with dedicated evidence technicians.

"I think it's awesome and it's a long time coming," he said.

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[Sidebar]

PARTICIPATING POLICE AGENCIES

Portland

Cumberland County Sheriff's Office

South Portland

Westbrook

Cape Elizabeth

Scarborough

Falmouth

Windham

Yarmouth

Credit: By DAVID HENCH Staff Writer

Illustration

Caption: Gordon Chibroski/ Staff Photographer Portland City Manager Joe Gray, left, City Councilor Nick Mavodones and Police Chief James Craig talk about the new regional crime lab in Portland.

Indexing (details)

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