

With added lab staff, DNA tests resolve string of old killings

archive.jsonline.com/news/wisconsin/56121622.html

By Ryan Haggerty of the Journal Sentinel

Published on: 8/29/2009

It's becoming harder to get away with murder in Wisconsin.

Thanks in large part to advances in DNA technology and the work of law enforcement officers devoted to investigating long-unsolved killings, a steady stream of cold-case homicides from throughout the state has been cracked in recent months.

Charges have been filed this year in at least seven killings dating back to 1976. All the cases depend in part on DNA evidence that links the suspects to the crimes.

On Wednesday, Milwaukee County District Attorney John T. Chisholm said his office expects to file charges soon in yet another cold-case homicide.

Officials also announced Wednesday that DNA testing has identified suspects in connection with five other homicides that occurred in Milwaukee from 1983 to 1994. Four of those suspects are already incarcerated in connection with other crimes.

Finally, investigators have developed DNA profiles of suspects in two other unsolved killings that occurred in Milwaukee but have not been able to match the DNA with suspects, Chisholm said.

In addition to improved DNA testing technology and specialized units that focus on cold cases, homicide investigators say the progress can be traced to an increase in staffing at the State Crime Laboratory and an infusion of government money to support the investigations.

Still, improved DNA testing is at the root of many of the cases that are finally moving forward, said Richard Luell, a special agent with the Wisconsin Department of Justice's Division of Criminal Investigation.

"With the advancement in science, everything is moving ahead at lightning speed," said Luell, who works exclusively on long-unsolved homicides. "It's amazing the hits that we're getting that were not possible years ago. . . . It's sending a message out there that just because you got away with it for a while, it's certainly not forgotten on our side."

The State Crime Lab, which processes DNA samples from across the state, essentially doubled its staff of DNA analysts when it hired about 30 new analysts in 2007, said Gary Hamblin, who oversees the crime lab as head of the Division of Law Enforcement Services in

the state Department of Justice.

The extra staffing has helped the lab cut through a backlog of DNA samples while expediting the testing of high-priority cases, Hamblin said.

The lab expected a roughly 12% increase in cases this year, but the actual number of cases submitted to the lab so far in 2009 is significantly higher than anticipated, Hamblin said.

It wasn't that long ago that the only information that could be gleaned from blood found at a crime scene was a person's blood type, Hamblin said.

"That narrowed it down to about 80% of the population and wasn't much help," he said.

"Now that same drop of blood can provide a DNA sample that is about as close to positive identification as we can get." Even with the assistance of DNA testing, investigations of long-unsolved homicides still rely on painstaking work, from trying to track down witnesses to gleaning hundreds of pages of case documents for a potential lead, said Milwaukee police Detective Katherine Hein, who works exclusively on cold cases.

"Once we develop DNA at a crime scene, that doesn't prove that someone is a killer," Hein said. "It proves that they were there. The hard part of this job is going back and proving that the DNA profile of a particular person belongs to the killer. That's where a lot of the legwork comes in. That's where we need physical evidence. That's where we need witnesses to corroborate the DNA."

Just as important, Hein and Luell said, are tips provided by witnesses or people with knowledge of the crime, even if the killing occurred decades ago. Hein encouraged people to contact police even if they are not sure if their information is correct, since DNA testing can often definitively prove whether a person was involved in a murder.

Investigating cold cases is a frustrating process, but finally solving the crime creates a unique sense of satisfaction, Luell said.

"We're bringing closure to families," he said. "No one is ever going to bring back that lost loved one, but at least they know that they're getting justice."