

2000 - 2001
Ventura County Grand Jury Report
Sheriff's Department Crime Lab

Sheriff's Department Crime Lab.

Background

On March 7, 2000, the voters of Ventura County and the State of California defeated Proposition 15, the Crime Laboratories Construction Bond. (County-wide, Yes votes were 42.6% and No votes 57.4%, State-wide, Yes 46.3% and No 53.7%.) The Ventura County Sheriff's Department Forensic Crime Laboratory and the closely associated Property Room and Evidence Booking area would have been the benefactor had the proposition passed.

Since that election, there have been other attempts to obtain federal or state grant funds for the purpose of updating or remodeling existing crime labs within the state of California. Specifically, in April of 2000, Senate Bill SB1485 was introduced that requested \$220 million in matching grant funding from the State of California's budget for crime lab construction.

The Ventura County Forensic Crime Lab Manager testified before the Senate Public Safety Committee May 14 and 15, 2000, and again before the Assembly Public Safety Committee in August, in a vain attempt to urge the committees to vote in favor of this bill. Unfortunately, the bill was held in the Assembly Appropriations Committee and did not come to a vote during that legislative session.

Senate Bill SB783 and Assembly Bill AB1210 are new bills before the present session of the State Legislature, again requesting matching grant funding from the general fund for crime laboratory construction and/or renovation in nineteen substandard crime laboratories throughout the state of California.

The AB1210 Assembly Bill analysis contains language in the comments portion, under the sub heading of "Author's Statement", that somewhat describes the dilemma of the nineteen substandard crime laboratories, including the Ventura County Crime Lab. It states, "Two years ago, the Governor signed a bill that gave \$96 million to Los Angeles to get the city and county crime laboratories up to speed. But, unfortunately, that leaves victims at the other crime laboratories waiting for justice to be served in their cases."

The unsuccessful attempts to obtain state grant funds, and the defeat of Proposition 15 were discussed during the Grand Jury's initial visit to the crime lab. These facts, and the conditions observed in the facility during that visit, were a major cause of concern to the Grand Jury. A second visit to the crime lab was made to determine the impact of the inability to obtain these funds.

Methodology

The Grand Jury made a protocol visit to the Ventura County Sheriff's Crime Lab on February 8, 2001, and a second visit on March 7. In addition, several follow-up telephone conversations were required to verify and update the findings.

Findings

- F-1 In 1992, the total number of Dry Drug (solid dosage) cases received by the crime lab was 831. By 1999 that number had increased to 1646 cases and in year 2000, the total number increased to 1791.
- F-2 As of April 12, 2001, the backlog of solid dosage drug cases in Ventura County's crime lab stood at 385 cases.
- F-3 The building the Crime Lab occupies is seriously outdated.
- F-4 The construction of the building does not readily accommodate new technological equipment, i.e.: forensic test equipment, computers, and networking.
- F-5 The Crime Lab area was originally designed to accommodate a staff of 8 people, but now must accommodate a staff of 25 people, plus 4 to 6 students, in the same basic area.
- F-6 O.S.H.A. has recommended that each staff member in a forensic laboratory have 1,300 square feet of working space. Presently, each person has approximately 258 square feet of space.
- F-7 The State Auditor Post Inspection Report of Dec. 1998 states, "Current forensic laboratory design literature indicates that the ratios for recently constructed forensic laboratories fall between the range of 700 to 1,000 square feet per staff member. In addition, the Department of General Services recently contracted with an architectural consulting firm to design six new state-operated regional laboratories with an even higher average ratio of approximately 1,300 square feet per staff member."
- F-8 Although management has plans for a minor remodel, lab management has stated that the gain in space will suffice for at most four to five years. The remodel is estimated to increase working space from the present 250 square feet per person to approximately 470 square feet per person.
- F-9 At the present time, there are no formal plans drawn for the remodel.
- F-10 The Sheriff's Evidence Booking/Property room has reached capacity. (Photos 1 and 2)
- F-11 Refrigeration units have been added to the premises in the garage and parking lot areas to handle the overflow of evidence from the property room (Photo 3)



Photo 1-Laboratory Freezer

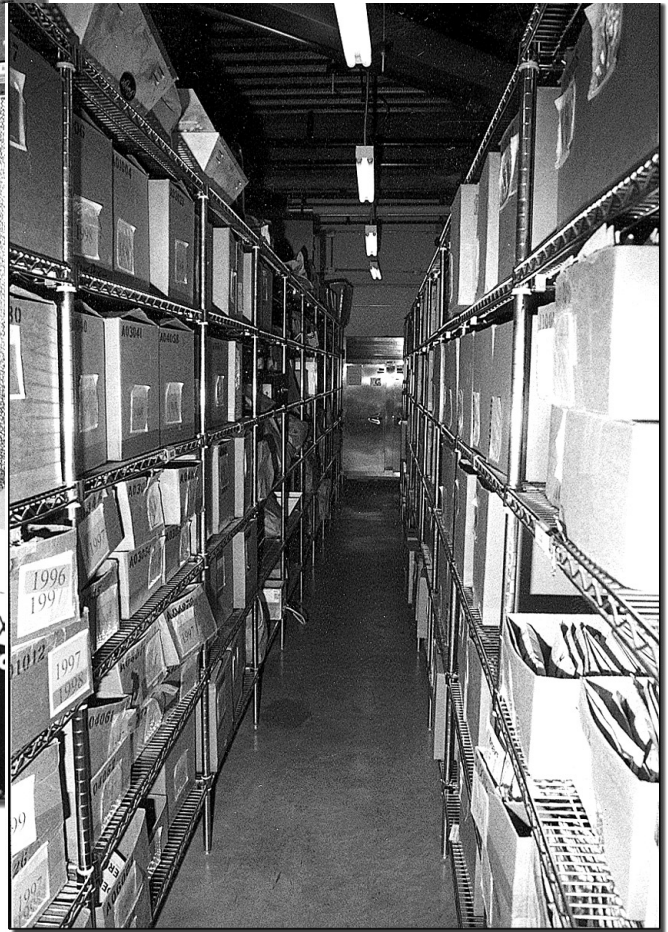


Photo 2-Property Room



Photo 3-Freezers in Outdoor Parking Area

- F-12 In the Crime Lab, every available space has been used for storage, even to the extent of using hallways. (Photo 4)
- F-13 It takes 90 minutes round trip travel time to retrieve evidence or case files that must be stored off site at the Women's Detention Facility in Ojai.
- F-14 The employee lounge also serves as a classroom, conference room, library, and storage room. Employee's lockers were relocated to an adjacent hallway, as more space was required for the library. (Photos 5 and 6)
- F-15 In order to become more competitive in the recruitment of the highly qualified personnel, Crime Lab management has suggested that an internship program be established with CSUCI, Ventura County's only 4 year University. The lab currently has the staff qualified to instruct interns.
- F-16 State certification of the DNA portion of the lab will expire in June 2002.
- F-17 If certification of the lab's DNA section cannot be maintained, DNA evidence would be sent to another facility, with established credibility, to be processed. Depending on the quantity of evidence involved and the facility selected the expense becomes an issue.
- F-18 The application for state certification must be submitted to the State Certification Board well in advance of the certification expiration date due to the lag time it takes for state inspectors to respond.
- F-19 The application for re-certification may be conditional upon the entire lab becoming certified.
- F-20 The current power situation and the frequent power outages or interruptions have caused biological evidence, stored in refrigerated units that failed due to the outages, to be rendered useless. As a result, drug cases were dismissed in court for lack of evidence. Although the District Attorney re-filed on some of these cases, the process takes time and money, and the defendant has to be rearrested.
- F-21 Frequent power outages or interruptions have also caused sophisticated test equipment and computers to re-boot and lose valuable data. Costly man-hours must then be expended to recover this data.
- F-22 At the present time, there is no system of adequate and reliable back-up power, i.e.: uninterruptible power source (UPS) power regulators for all sensitive circuits in the lab.
- F-23 A classification in the budget exists for the position of Assistant Forensic Laboratory Manager but has not yet been funded.

Conclusions

- C-1 Due to the workload, and the many and varied tasks required of the current manager of the forensic crime lab, there is an obvious need to fund and fill the position of Assistant Forensic Laboratory Manager. (F-23)

Photo 6-Staff Lockers in Hallway

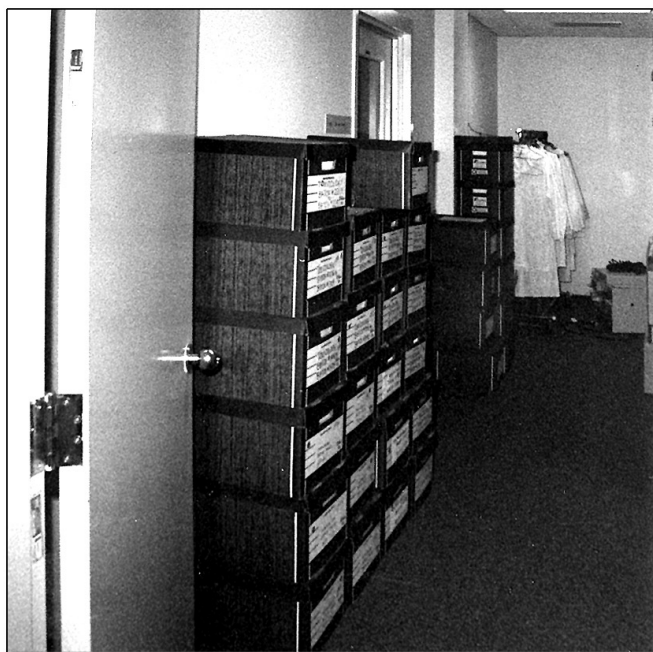


Photo 4-Evidence Files Stored in Hallway



Photo 5-Library/Lunch Room/Conference

- C-2 The serious space problem that presently exists, if allowed to continue, will further hamper efforts to stay in step with the rapidly increasing caseloads. (F-1, F-14)
- C-3 Workspace must be nearly tripled in order to prevent possible cross contamination of evidence in some areas of the lab. This is a legal as well as an expense issue. (F-1 through F-14)
- C-4 Maintaining State Certification is at risk. Thus, the ability to follow up cold cases, and thereby apprehend predatory type criminals would be placed in jeopardy. (F-17 through F-19)
- C-5 Without state certification of the DNA section of the lab, DNA evidence would have to be sent to another lab for analysis. This could result in delays in prosecution of criminals as well as increased expense to the Ventura County's justice system and ultimately, its taxpayers. (F-17 through F-19)
- C-6 Due to our State's current unreliable power source situation, UPS back up power systems must be in place by this summer. (F-20 through F-22)
- C-7 The current cramped working conditions throughout the lab may hamper the proposed internship program with CSUCI. This could also affect the ability to attract the highly skilled personnel required in our Crime Lab. (F-5 through F-19)
- C-8 The proposed remodel will still leave the facility with less than half of the recommended workspace per person which is considerably smaller than the 1,300 square feet per person mentioned in the State Auditor report and that O.S.H.A. recommends. (F-6 through F-8)
- C-9 While a remodel is better than nothing, it will only serve as a temporary fix for, at most, four or five years. (F-8)

Recommendations

- R-1 The Ventura County Sheriff's Dept. Chief in charge of Special Services, and the Commander in charge of technical services should continue to make every effort to hire an Assistant Forensic Crime Lab Manager (C-1)
- R-2 The planned move and modification (remodel) of the existing areas should be funded and carried out as soon as possible, complete with formalized plans. (F-8, C-2, C-9)
- R-3 Every effort must be made by County Supervisors, and involved Department Heads, and Administrators to secure funding for the location and construction of a new Sheriff's Crime Lab facility by 2006, in part to implement plans in association with CSUCI. (Ref. F-6, F-7, F-15, C-7)

Commendations

The management of the Crime Lab, as well as the entire staff, is commended for exemplary work under formidable circumstances. Despite adverse working conditions, accuracy has not been sacrificed. The citizens of Ventura County are indeed fortunate for having this team to serve their needs. (F-8, F-14, F-21, C-1)

Responses Required

Ventura County Sheriff's Dept. (R-1, R-2, R-3)

Board of Supervisors (R-1, R-2, R-3)

CAO (R-1, R-2, R-3)

GSA (R-2, R-3)

