

JUSTICE DEPT. ACTS TO CLEAR DNA BACKLOG

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With hundreds of thousands of unanalyzed DNA samples sitting in state crime labs, Attorney General John Ashcroft said Wednesday that states would receive federal dollars to deal with the genetic evidence that could help solve crimes or clear the innocent.

The Justice Department will provide more than \$30 million over the next 18 months for crime labs to analyze DNA collected from criminals and from crime scenes that, in some states, has been left undocumented in storage lockers for weeks or months after it was gathered.

A law signed last December authorized the department to provide the money.

New testing technology and highly reliable results have made DNA samples a powerful law enforcement tool, driving states to pass laws requiring accused or convicted rapists, murderers and even robbers to submit DNA samples.

The samples can help solve cases that have languished for years. But labs are overloaded with samples; an estimated one million DNA samples collected from criminals have never been analyzed.

Ashcroft said more than 180,000 kits with DNA samples collected from rape cases across the country have never been analyzed.

"DNA technology can operate as a kind of truth machine, ensuring justice by identifying the guilty and clearing the innocent," Ashcroft said at a news conference. "Backlogs of unanalyzed DNA samples and unacceptable delays in analysis of crime scene DNA evidence are preventing the full utilization of this remarkable technology in solving crimes and promoting justice."

The grants will pay for 500,000 samples to be analyzed, Ashcroft said.

Ashcroft also asked the FBI to improve its Combined DNA Index System, a national computer network that allows comparisons with samples in other states, and ordered a Justice Department study on how to eliminate delays in obtaining DNA test results, which can take from six months to a year.

"Ideally, with current technology, any delays in obtaining test results should be at most a matter of days rather than weeks, months or more," Ashcroft said.

The attorney general was joined at a news conference by Republican and Democratic lawmakers who supported the DNA backlog legislation, including Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y.

Schumer praised Ashcroft's DNA initiative. "You and I agree on a lot more than people think we do," said Schumer, whose state has 15,000 rape cases that have never been analyzed.

Some lawmakers want federal grants for alleviating the DNA backlogs to be contingent upon states passing laws allowing convicts access to DNA testing that could exonerate them if the tests were not available at trial.

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