

State: Don't let rape kits sit

Written by By Bernie Dotson Sun Correspondent
Friday, 08 July 2016 00:18

NM Auditor's Office wants to prevent backlogs

DNA evidence from a sex crime can be collected from a crime scene, but it's even more useful for law enforcement agencies if it comes from a victim's body, clothes, or personal belongings. Victims may choose to have a sexual assault forensic exam, also called a "rape kit," which preserves possible DNA evidence.

Rape kits were the topic of a June 23 visit by Sarita Nair, chief legal counsel under State Auditor Tim Keller, who gave a one-hour presentation at the El Morro Theatre on the importance of law enforcement agencies processing rape kits so as to avoid backlogs.

"The idea with rape kits is to get current and stay current," Nair said.

Nair is travelling around the state to educate the public about rape kits. In a tour of the Gallup Police Department, she noted that there were no untested rape kits in the evidence room. She praised former interim Police Chief Franklin Boyd for staying ahead of the situation.

"I have spoken to the chief, and I also commended [him] for a job well done," Nair said. "This is something that takes on various other subjects."

Nair said Gallup's situation is noteworthy because just a few months ago there were 53 untested rape kits at the GPD.

The rape kits ultimately go to a state laboratory for final testing. A large number of untested kits typically can be found in places like Albuquerque, according to Connie Monahan, statewide programs coordinator for the New Mexico Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs.

Monahan travels the state with Nair and provides statistical information at the community

State: Don't let rape kits sit

Written by By Bernie Dotson Sun Correspondent
Friday, 08 July 2016 00:18

meetings.

Around New Mexico on the whole, as of several months ago, there were 5,410 untested rape kits sitting in police evidence rooms at the state lab, Nair said.

"Some rapes don't get reported for a number of reasons," Monahan said. "It happens especially when a victim is classified as homeless."

Nair said homeless rape cases are sometimes difficult to prosecute because of the lack of information district attorneys have to act on. She noted that the testing of a rape kit is important because it helps police solve other rape cases, no matter the jurisdiction.

Patricia Lundstrom, a state representative and the executive director of the Greater Gallup Economic Development Corporation, asked Nair if all rape kits go to the same state lab. Nair responded no, saying cases from the Navajo Nation, for example, go to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Lab in Quantico, Virginia.

Nair said that within the next few months, meetings will be conducted in Albuquerque, Hobbs, Las Cruces, and Española. When community meetings around New Mexico conclude, a report will be issued on how to deal with rape kits, generally, in the future.

Some 20 people from around Gallup and McKinley County attended the Gallup meeting.

"The number of people that come to the meetings varies," Nair said. "But it's important that backlogs be done away with."

Alicia Perlas, who works part-time in an area dental office, said she attended the meeting for informational purposes.

State: Don't let rape kits sit

Written by By Bernie Dotson Sun Correspondent
Friday, 08 July 2016 00:18

"It's interesting how the whole DNA process is done," Perlas said. "I think more people should know about stuff like this."

***By Bernie Dotson
Sun Correspondent***