Detroit's 11,303 untested rape kits subject of NBC's Rock Center Thursday

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DETROIT — Wayne County Prosecutor Kym Worthy is appearing on NBC's Rock Center with Brian Williams Thursday to discuss the daunting and expensive task of testing thousands of rape kits found collecting dust in Detroit evidence rooms.

(See MSNBC clip here)

"The show will focus on the 11,303 untested rape kits discovered in August of 2009 during a tour of a Detroit Police Department property storage warehouse," a Wayne County Prosecutor's release says. "The piece will also focus on the work of the Detroit Sexual Assault Kit Action Research Project to address the problem and create a national protocol for other jurisdictions that encounter this issue across the nation."

It airs at 10 p.m. Thursday.

Rape or sexual assault kits are administered after sexual assault accusations to collect fluids and other forensic evidence for investigation and to help convict suspects.

Thousands of Detroit women have submitted to the intrusive testing in hopes their cooperation would help police find their attackers.

But the kits were stored, forgotten and never processed, some up to 15 years ago. When they were discovered, the Detroit Police Department Crime Lab was disbanded and its evidence transferred to state police for handling.

Since the discovery, tests have linked forensic evidence to at least two men that committed crimes after their DNA was in police possession.

• Related: Testing of 11,303 rape kits rescued from Detroit Crime Lab a long way off

The most recent case is that of Eric Taliaferro, who was sentenced to prison for 10 to 15 years on to fist-degree sexual assault convictions stemming from more than a decade ago.

"14 years ago the victim in this case was sexually assaulted and, because her untested rape kit sat ignored in an evidence warehouse, Mr. Taliaferro walked free," Wayne County Prosecutor Kym Worthy said. "Now Taliaferro has lost his freedom.

"It is fitting that he will serve just over a year in prison for each year that the rape sat on the shelf."

Another of the test kits contained DNA belonging to Shelly A. Brooks, 43, a serial rapist and killer arrested in 2006. "Shelly A. Brooks killed and raped five more women after the date on this rape kit," Worthy said at the City Under Seige: A University Forum on the Crime Crisis in Detroit forum in September. "So that means if the rape kits were analyzed in a timely fashion perhaps, perhaps these five women would still be alive."

The State Police Crime Lab is handling the testing of the kits, but it's going to be a long time before they are caught up.

The agency is spending about $1 million a year in National Institute of Justice DNA Backlog Reduction Program grants to test about 800 kits per year at a per-kit cost of $1,250. At $1,250, it would cost greater than $14 million to test all 11,303 kits.

So far, fewer than 1,000 of the backlogged kits have been tested.

MLive Detroit requested permission from the Detroit Police Department to view the kits and was denied.

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