Detroit is starting to sort through thousands of boxes of potential evidence in rape cases that have been left unprocessed. The 11,000 "rape kits" were discovered in 2009, and Wayne County prosecutor Kym Worthy has been leading the effort to process them.

In April, she told weekends on All Things Considered that they began with a random sample of 400 kits to get a snapshot of what they were dealing with. That sampling led to two trials, which resulted in convictions. "Both of those defendants are now serving time for a very, very long time," Worthy tells Jacki Lyden, host of weekends on All Things Considered. Lab technicians have tested an additional 243 kits, which Worthy says uncovered more than 21 serial rapists just in that sample. Worthy has estimated that processing all of the backlogged kits would cost around $15 million. Currently, the city has the money to test about 800 to 1,000 kits.

"So we have a lot more work to do in raising funds to see that these kits are tested," she says.

Despite the work left undone, Worthy believes progress can be made to correct the problem nationwide.

"I'm hopeful that if people take the right approach from the very beginning that we can certainly put a dent in this," she says.

After a national protocol is developed, Worthy says, people will know how to handle untested kits.

"But even more optimistically," she says, "I really hope that people will not be stockpiling these rape kits, and we will not even have this as a problem."

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JACKI LYDEN, HOST:
Back in April, we reported on the discovery in Detroit of more than 11,000 unprocessed rape kits stacked up and forgotten in a police evidence room. Wayne County prosecutor Kym Worthy took on the enormous task of figuring out if any of these rape kits could still produce enough evidence to help police make arrests.

KYM WORTHY: The first major thing that was done is that there was a random sample taken from the 11,000. And we were told by the Michigan State University statistics department that if we take 400 of these kits randomly, that'll give us a snapshot of what we have in the 11,000. As a matter of fact, we have two of those cases that are currently set for trial.

LYDEN: We've got Kym Worthy on the line now. Ms. Worthy, welcome back.

WORTHY: Thank you.

LYDEN: When you last spoke to us, you mentioned that 400-kit snapshot that we just talked about and that the two cases were scheduled for trial. So could you please give us an update on the status of this backlog?

WORTHY: Well, happily, the two cases that I talked about that were set for trial - we have two convictions on those cases. And both of those defendants are now serving time for a very, very long time. And we also have some new kits that have been tested. And out of the 243, in addition to the 400 that were previously tested, we have found - and this is a sad note - that we have over 21 serial rapists just out of those 241.

LYDEN: You prognosticated if you were to go through all 11,000, it was going to cost something around $15 million. Do you have enough money to keep processing these?

WORTHY: Right now, we have the money to test about anywhere from 800 to 1,000. So we have a lot more work to do in raising funds to see that these kits are tested.

LYDEN: Eleven thousand kits in Detroit. There were another 11,000 that hadn't been processed in San Antonio, Texas, other parts of the country. What have you learned from this? Are you more hopeful now that these cases will be solved?

WORTHY: Well, I'm hopeful that if people take the right approach from the very beginning that we can certainly put a dent in this, number one. That we can - after our national protocol is developed that people will know exactly what to do if untested or backlogged rape kits are found in their jurisdictions. But even more, optimistically, I really hope that people will not be stockpiling these rape kits and we will not even have this as a problem.

LYDEN: That's Wayne County prosecutor Kym Worthy speaking to us from her home in Michigan. Thank you very much for your time. And we're wishing you very good luck.

WORTHY: And thank you for being concerned about this issue. That really means a lot to all of us working on this.

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