

Labs remain a low priority for many legislatures and local governments because they're not as visible as other services, but they're every bit as crucial. Cases dependent on lab results are pushed back on the docket, often resulting in delays that make it harder to try them - and keep prisoners in jail for longer times. That, says Houck, is the real tragedy of not having a swifter turn-around time on evidence.

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"The number of cases that are backlogged may sound terrible, but it's really just a number. What it represents are criminals who are still free to act," he explains.

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The solution is, of course, a higher priority on lab funding. Houck says we have to look ahead and plan for future developments in the field. He suggests depending less on government and more on private industry by outsourcing work whenever feasible and training supervisors to be better businessmen and women.

"Supervisors in crime labs are great scientists, but not necessarily trained to be managers," he says. "They have funding but don't know how to spend it."

Houck says the key is to bring business management into lab settings. Advocate for more money, but manage the scarce resources labs already have more efficiently. Other suggestions based on his experience in the field:

- Establish a protocol on outsourcing.
- Prune the workload by looking at the evidence supply chain: are officers or crime scene techs sending everything that isn't nailed down to the lab? If so, educate them to collect only the evidence that matters.
- Train officers so they know what capabilities the lab has. The more they know about it, the better a resource it becomes.
- Make sure the lab knows the particulars of a case before it works the evidence: stranger-on-stranger crime, for example, is different from spouse-on-spouse.
- Communicate with the lab - and vice versa. Discussions can save time by ruling out unnecessary tests.

How important is a good lab to an agency? Houck says a recent study in the United Kingdom found that one successful DNA hit prevented eight crimes.

That's eight people whose lives are significantly impacted by fast, accurate lab work - and that's what it's all about.

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