

FY 12 Strategic Approaches to Sexual Assault Kit (SAK) Evidence Grant Awards and Abstracts

FY12 Recipient Name: Wayne County Prosecutor's Office

Award Number: 2011-DN-BX-0001

Award Amount: \$75,000

Other Information About this Project: In addition to the \$75,000 in DNA funds, NIJ is also using \$130,000 in FY 2012 "Base" funds, and \$310,000 from prior years (FY2011 or earlier) in "carry over" funds that were not previously obligated. [NOTE: The original award was made in FY 2011 for \$200,000, with a FY 2011 supplement in the amount of \$800,000. The project period is 4/1/2011 – 9/30/2013.]

Recipient: Houston Police Department

Award Number: 2011-DN-BX-0002

Award Amount: \$75,000

Other Information About this Project: In addition to the \$75,000 in DNA funds, NIJ is also using \$130,000 in FY 2012 "Base" funds, and \$310,000 from prior years (FY2011 or earlier) in "carry over" funds that were not previously obligated. [NOTE: The original award was made in FY 2011 for \$178,076, with a FY 2011 supplement in the amount of \$821,814. The project period is 4/1/2011 – 3/31/2014.]

Program Description

NIJ issued a solicitation in FY 2011, entitled "Strategic Approaches to Sexual Assault Kit Evidence: An Action Research Project." The solicitation sought applications to participate in an action research project designed for state and local jurisdictions that were struggling with large quantities of untested sexual assault kits (SAKs) that had not been submitted to a crime laboratory. As a result of the competitive process, NIJ awarded research grants to the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office (Detroit) and the Houston Police Department in April 2011. The purpose of the study is to understand the underlying nature of the problem of untested SAK evidence and to identify effective and sustainable solutions to prioritization and testing of kits. This action-research project was specifically designed to examine the reasons for what had become an inexplicably large quantity of untested SAKs. Results from these studies may assist other jurisdictions in examining their problems with untested SAK evidence.

The project is taking place in two phases. The first (completed) was a six-month planning phase to conduct a formal audit of untested evidence within each jurisdiction and develop evidence-testing strategies. The second, ongoing phase is focusing on evidence testing and development of strategies related to victim notification, investigation, and prosecution of viable cases. Both phases included mixed-methods research activities, such as interviewing key stakeholders, documenting the collaborative process and decisions made, developing and testing data collection instruments, and developing research methods and analytic strategies to examine the outcomes related to evidence testing, investigation, victim notification, and prosecution.

FY2012 funding continues to support this groundbreaking research and will provide much-needed information to other jurisdictions that are struggling with large numbers of untested SAKs. The funding will allow the Detroit and Houston to examine the criminal justice outcomes of viable cases and their victim impact, and identify the most cost-effective evidence-testing approaches. Furthermore, the number of CODIS hits at these sites has been much higher than anticipated; because each case with a hit requires some level of investigative and prosecutorial follow-up, additional resources will be used for the follow-up activities on the project. This is to be expected in that action research, by definition, represents an empirically driven, ongoing research effort. In fact, one of the defining characteristics of action research is the give and take between researchers and practitioners as they work together to understand a problem and work toward solutions.

Considerable attention has been focused on this topic by Congress, victims advocate groups, and the public at large. These groups — as well as practitioners in the criminal justice system in general and especially those in jurisdictions facing this problem — are awaiting the results of these studies in hopes of developing similar strategies based on the studies' findings. The tools created will target key audiences with significant information such as cost estimates and processes and procedures that other jurisdictions will find useful as they seek to solve their own problems with respect to untested SAK evidence.