

## Police to overhaul fingerprint lab

Officials eye hiring of civilian analysts

By Suzanne Smalley, Globe Staff | April 9, 2005

Boston police are planning an overhaul of the department's fingerprint lab to address longstanding problems with accuracy in identifying fingerprints and backlogs that led to investigative delays. The remedies include hiring five civilian fingerprint analysts and improving training for police officers in all aspects of crime scene analysis.

The fingerprint unit was blamed for the wrongful conviction of Stephan Cowans of Roxbury, who was charged in the shooting and wounding of a police officer in 1997.

Police hope to train officers as crime scene analysts in all aspects of forensic science, from photographing bodies to studying ballistics, in an effort to standardize department procedures and improve efficiency. It is not clear yet how many officers will receive the training.

Police Superintendent Paul Joyce and Captain Thomas Dowd, who are spearheading the effort, say they will unveil a "comprehensive crime scene response team" within the next year. Several jobs will be created as part of the effort, they said.

Joyce said police management is negotiating with the unions over adding civilian jobs. Joyce said his goal is to have a "stronger, more unified and coordinated approach to processing crime scenes."

"Photographing a scene is different from finding trace evidence," Dowd said. "We'll also need to get a more standard response across the city. . . . Because of [the television show] "CSI" the expectations are so high, and we need to be able to meet those."

Dowd, who runs the department's identification section, said the department hopes to eventually have enough highly trained crime scene analysts to staff three shifts. That would end the delays that occurred previously when the people working overnight -- when murders frequently occur -- often did not have the necessary expertise. Many procedures waited for those with proper technical skills to be roused from bed.

He said he also hopes to have the newly organized latent fingerprint unit, with five new civilian employees, up and running within six months. The work requires comparing prints found at crime scenes with suspects' prints and is scientifically rigorous, Dowd said. **In October, Commissioner Kathleen M. O'Toole shut down the latent print unit after the Cowans case collapsed, and the unit was blasted in a report from an outside consultant hired to examine it.**

Dowd acknowledged that the changes have come at a price for investigators who have to wait for print work to make arrests.

"You want it done so it's right, so it's bulletproof and will stand up 100 percent in court," he said. "We really didn't have any choice."

Dowd said the department has been paying the private firm Ron Smith and Associates more than \$30,000 a month to process prints since the second week of February.

The private consultants have been working on a mixture of old and new cases, Dowd said, and have made a dent in the backlog, having reviewed 340 cases.

Out of the 340 cases the consultants have worked on, prints have been good enough to be sent to the national fingerprint bank for comparison in 45 cases, Dowd said. "The goal when they came in was 700 [cases], so we've made progress," Dowd said.

