


[Subscriber Services](#)

Star-Telegram.com



Current: 66°

72° / 39°

[Complete Forecast](#)
[Search](#)
[Recent News](#)
[Archives](#)
[Web for](#)
Welcome **Guest**
[Sign Up](#) | [Sign In](#) | [Member Benefits](#)
[Back to Home](#) > [Star-Telegram](#) >

Wednesday, Jan 12, 2005

Star-Telegram

Texas News


[email this](#)

[print this](#)

Posted on Tue, Jan. 04, 2005

Lawmakers discuss ways to fix problems with crime labs

JUAN A. LOZANO
Associated Press

HOUSTON - The creation of regional crime labs independent of law enforcement agencies and of a commission to review the labs around the state were among ideas discussed Tuesday during a legislative committee meeting on crime lab woes.

The Senate Committee on Criminal Justice heard from law enforcement officials as well as two men who have been freed from prison after reviews of their cases determined inaccurate DNA evidence led to their convictions.

The meeting was in response to problems at various crime labs around the state, particularly the one run by the Houston Police Department. The Houston crime lab has been under fire for mislabeling and improperly storing old cases, possible evidence contamination and training problems in its DNA section, which closed in 2002.

Since March 2003, the Harris County district attorney's office has been reviewing evidence processed by the DNA lab and ordered retests in approximately 400 cases. The retests have resulted in the release and pardon of a man convicted in a 1998 rape case.

Barry Scheck, a co-founder of the Innocence Project, encouraged lawmakers to draft and approve a bill during the upcoming legislative session to create a statewide commission with oversight powers over all crime labs around Texas.

"The time for effective statewide oversight of crime labs is here," said Scheck, whose Innocence Project is a legal clinic based at New York's Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law. "Texas is well positioned to lead the nation in getting to the bottom of these injustices."

By Scheck's side were George Rodriguez and Brandon Moon, two former Texas inmates freed through the efforts of the Innocence Project.

"I'm glad to see the committee is considering some of the issues that have been bothering me for a long time ... a lack of oversight and the randomness in methods of testing," said Moon, who was released two weeks ago after DNA tests determined that he was not responsible for a rape in El Paso. He had served nearly 17 years in prison.

Sen. John Whitmire, D-Houston, committee chairman, said one potential solution to problems with Texas crime labs would be to set up regional DNA labs so the process can be streamlined and better regulated.

Houston Police Chief Harold Hurtt said since he had not previously received an indication from state leaders that regional crime labs are being pursued, he is focusing on improving Houston's facility and restoring its credibility.

Hurtt said he hopes an individual to head the police department's independent review of the crime lab will be chosen by April. The department is also looking at creating a new evidence storage facility and crime lab within the next three to five years. The new joint facility could cost more than \$60 million.

"We're on the right track," he said. "We as a city are committed to getting this done right and we know it's going to cost us."

Harris County District Attorney Chuck Rosenthal acknowledged that there have been problems with the Houston crime lab and that he is open to appointing a blue ribbon commission to review problems at the facility.

But he believes steps have already been taken to ensure that cases with questionable DNA evidence, particularly those where a defendant received the death penalty, have been adequately reviewed.

"I have to live with my decisions. I have to sleep at night and I can do that," Rosenthal said.

 [email this](#)  [print this](#)

**REAL
Cities** Click here
to visit other
Real Cities sites

[News](#) | [Business](#) | [Sports](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [Living](#) | [Travel](#) | [Shop Local](#) | [Classifieds](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Cars](#) | [Homes](#)
[About the Real Cities Network](#) | [Terms of Use & Privacy Statement](#) | [About Knight Ridder](#) | [Copyright](#)