

The National Institute of Justice Forensic DNA Laboratory Improvement Program

An interview with Dr. Richard Rau

The National Institute of Justice Forensic DNA Laboratory Improvement Program is authorized by the "DNA Identification Act of 1994." This Act provides for the allocation of \$40 million dollars in funds over a five year period. The purpose of the program is "to increase the capabilities and capacity of state and local forensic laboratories to conduct DNA testing." The allocation of these funds supports the development of a comprehensive, nationwide criminal DNA database, compatible and cooperating with the FBI's Combined DNA Index System (CODIS).

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The 1996 solicitation for the NIJ Forensic DNA Laboratory Improvement Program (available on the Internet at: www.ncjrs.org:80/fedgrant.htm#NIJ) lists some of the specific objectives of this project as follows:

- To develop DNA testing in laboratories that currently do not conduct DNA testing.
- To improve forensic DNA testing in state and local laboratories that already conduct DNA testing, especially for sexual assaults having unknown assailants.
- To facilitate implementation of state laws requiring the establishment of databases of DNA records of convicted offenders.
- To foster compatibility and cooperation among forensic laboratories within and between states that are seeking to match and exchange DNA identification records for law enforcement purposes through FBI's CODIS.
- To provide the greatest overall improvement in the nation's DNA testing capabilities, recognizing current and projected DNA testing requirements and identifying current and foreseeable technological trends.

In an effort to obtain more information on the current status of this program, *Profiles in DNA* conducted an interview with Dr. Richard Rau. Dr. Rau is the Program Manager for the National Institute of Justice Forensic DNA Laboratory Improvement Program.

Q: Who is eligible to apply for funding under this program?

A: Eligible applicants must be state or local government laboratories. Awards may be used to purchase laboratory equipment and supplies, to make structural modifications to existing laboratory space to allow safe and accurate performance of DNA typing methodologies, to provide training for DNA analysts in accordance with TWGDAM (Technical Working Group on DNA Analysis Methods) guidelines, and to purchase hardware and software compatible with CODIS. In the short term, award money may also be used to pay for contractor-provided DNA typing services to expedite backlogs of collected but unanalyzed samples.

Generally speaking, proposals which demonstrate that statewide planning has taken place, and which provide justification of the need for DNA testing capabilities, will be most successful.

Q: In its first year (1995), the Forensic DNA Laboratory Improvement Program awarded 37 grants for a total amount of \$8,750,000, \$8 million of which was contributed by the FBI. Do you expect to continue to fund at this level this year?

A: This year we expect to allocate a further \$3 million. We have received 62 applications in response to the September 1996 solicitation, and are beginning the review process. A solicitation for applications for the third year of this program will be issued in the Summer of 1997.

Q: What constitutes your review process?

A: Applications for funding are reviewed by a panel of experts in the field of DNA typing. Given that we have 62 applications to review this year, the review process can be somewhat lengthy. Once completed, the panel's reviews are passed on to the Director of NIJ, who makes the final award decisions. Applicants receive a copy of the review when notified of the success or failure of their application.

Q: What are the characteristics of a successful application?

A: Successful awards emphasize the acquisition of equipment, supplies and training necessary to develop or improve DNA testing capabilities. Unsuccessful applications are typically poorly written and lack adequate descriptions of proposed DNA typing techniques. We recommend that labs that do not have DNA testing facilities currently in place

consult with an expert to aid in planning for future needs before completing their application. Our solicitations provide comprehensive instructions covering all aspects of the application process, including compilation of a detailed budget and budget narrative. Applicants who have questions are encouraged to contact me to discuss their proposal before submitting an application.

Q: Once an application is funded, how is the award administered?

A: Grants are awarded for a one year period. Funds awarded must be used during the life of the grant. Laboratories seeking continued funding to implement the next phase of a project begun under a previous award may submit an application for a continuation of funding at the time of the next year's solicitation.

Q: One of the stated aims of the program is to "foster compatibility and cooperation among forensic laboratories within and between states that are seeking to match and exchange DNA identification records for law enforcement purposes through the FBI CODIS program." Do you welcome combined applications from more than one laboratory?

A: Individual laboratories may submit applications in conjunction with their state, city or county, or on their own. We have received several consortium applications and actively encourage laboratories to work together to develop consistent techniques for statewide DNA typing programs. For small laboratories which have a low caseload, it may be difficult to justify a need for funding for all DNA testing methodologies, so it makes sense for these laboratories to be part of a larger consortium application. Generally speaking, proposals which demonstrate that statewide planning has taken place, and which provide justification of the need for DNA testing capabilities, will be most successful.

Q: Another stated aim of the grant program is to "provide the greatest overall improvement in the nation's DNA testing capabilities, recognizing current and projected DNA testing requirements and identifying current and foreseeable technological trends." What criteria are used to judge whether this improvement is being achieved? Is there a system in place to evaluate the success of the program?

A: The program seeks to provide funds to enable laboratories nationwide to perform DNA testing methodologies in accordance with the established TWGDAM guidelines. Adherence to these guidelines promotes nationwide uniformity in the field of DNA typing. Success of the program will also be indicated by the participation of increasing numbers of laboratories in the sharing and exchange of DNA identification records through CODIS. We do plan to have a formal evaluation of the program's success in the future, but the process by which this will occur has not yet been defined.

For further information on the DNA Laboratory Improvement Program contact:

Dr. Richard M. Rau, Program Manager
Forensic DNA Laboratory
Improvement Program
National Institute of Justice
Office of Science and Technology
633 Indiana Ave., N.W., Room 911
Washington, DC 20531

e-mail: Rau@OJP.USDOJ.gov

For a detailed explanation of how to put together an application for funds, the 1996 solicitation is available on the Internet at: www.ncjrs.org:80/fedgrant.htm#NIJ. A new solicitation for 1997 is expected to be published later in the Summer.