

Research Plan: Capacity of Crime Labs in Tennessee

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Support:

Deputy Executive Director Approval: Initial: MMB Date: 5-16-24

Executive Director Approval: Initial:  Date: 5/16/24

Purpose

To study forensic crime labs across the state, including the feasibility and need for additional capacity, where any new needed crime labs should be located, and the ability of labs to process crime evidence efficiently.

Background

Forensic crime labs are needed to efficiently and effectively process evidence from crimes, conduct investigations, solve crimes, and bring cases to court to provide justice and safety to citizens. When the labs do not have enough capacity, it can delay the testing of evidence, such as rape kits and cell phone data. For example, Memphis, which in recent years had a backlog of untested rape kits, does not have a crime lab in the city. In 2021, the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation (TBI) moved its crime lab from Memphis to Jackson, and now the Memphis Police Department and Shelby County Sheriff's Office send their evidence to the West Tennessee Field Unit. The Shelby County District Attorney says, as a result, the city's solve rate for crimes in 2023 was "unacceptably low."¹ According to a report released in January by the TBI, the statewide average turnaround time for lab work on sexual offense cases is more than five months.² In addition to TBI's lab in Jackson, the agency operates labs in Nashville

¹ <https://www.localmemphis.com/article/news/crime/steve-mulroy-forensic-crime-lab-memphis-investigation/522-0f5cec64-e084-426e-8534-cda7619ab816>.

² <https://tennesseelookout.com/2024/01/16/tbi-reports-continued-delays-in-rape-kit-testing/>.

and Knoxville, and the Metro Nashville Police Department also operates its own lab. It is unclear whether Tennessee has enough capacity at existing crime labs across the state or how much additional capacity is needed to process evidence and investigate crimes efficiently and effectively.

House Bill 2961 by Hardaway and Senate Bill 2877 by Kyle would have required TACIR to study the feasibility of a crime lab in Shelby County and its impact on not only Memphis and Shelby County but on the entire state. The Senate bill passed, but the House bill did not advance out of the Finance, Ways and Means Subcommittee. It would have included examining the potential capacity of a new lab to serve the region, state, and contiguous states, the cost and financing options, and the effect on public safety. In April 2024, the Shelby County Board of Commissioners approved a \$50,000 feasibility study of building, staffing, and operating a crime lab in the county, and the Memphis-Shelby County Crime Commission will conduct the research. Commission member Representative Ryan Williams is interested in a broader Commission study of the feasibility of and need for additional crime labs across the state, including consideration of where any new crime labs would be located to best use resources.

Define the Problem

There have been backlogs for processing evidence at some crime labs in Tennessee, resulting in processing delays of months and sometimes years, which can impede the investigation of crimes and the resolution of the judicial process.

Assemble Some Evidence

- Interview the Commission member who requested the study, Representative Ryan Williams, and other members who expressed interest.
- Review relevant legislation and fiscal notes.
 - Review Senate Bill 2877 by Kyle and House Bill 2961 by Hardaway to determine how it relates to the study.
 - Interview the sponsors of Senate Bill 2877 and House Bill 2961.
 - Review view past legislation meant to address this issue, including committee hearings on those bills and the fiscal notes.
- Interview other stakeholders to determine what is driving this issue. These include but are not limited to representatives of the
 - Tennessee Bureau of Investigation

- District Attorneys General Conference
- Tennessee Department of Safety and Homeland Security
- Memphis/Shelby County Crime Commission
- Crime labs in the state, including but not limited to Metro Nashville, Knox County, and Murfreesboro
- National Institute of Justice
- Law enforcement agencies and other local government officials
- Nonprofit organizations that focus on the issue
- County Technical Advisory Service (CTAS)
- Municipal Technical Advisory Service (MTAS)
- Victim's advocacy groups
- Review Tennessee's relevant statutes and regulations.
- Review relevant federal statutes and regulations.
- Review relevant literature.
- Review similar policies and laws of other states.
- Gather relevant data sets.

Proposed Research Timeline



HOUSE BILL 2961

By Hardaway

AN ACT to amend Tennessee Code Annotated, Title 4;
Title 8 and Title 38, relative to crime labs.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE:

SECTION 1.

(a) The Tennessee advisory committee on intergovernmental relations (TACIR), with the assistance of the Tennessee bureau of investigation, the district attorneys general conference, and the department of safety, is directed to perform a study of the feasibility of a Shelby County crime lab and the impact of such a crime lab on public health, safety, education, housing, and the economy for citizens and visitors of Shelby County, the city of Memphis, this state, and the Tennessee, Arkansas, and Mississippi tri-state region.

(b) TACIR shall consult with and seek input from the county commission and the mayor of Shelby County, and all law enforcement agencies with jurisdiction in Shelby County.

(c) All appropriate state departments and agencies shall provide assistance to TACIR in connection with the study required in subsection (a).

(d) TACIR shall submit a report disclosing the findings of the study, including legislative and budget recommendations, to the general assembly no later than January 14, 2025.

SECTION 2. This act takes effect upon becoming a law, the public welfare requiring it.