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CSI: Denver

DPD's crime lab makes TV reality.

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Mitch Morrissey (left), Jon Priest and Greggory LaBerge hope a new grant will boost DNA research in Denver's crime lab.

On the sixth floor of Denver police headquarters at 1331 Cherokee Street is a cluster of rooms few people know about. From these spartan offices that overlook the mountains beyond and the city below, murders, rapes and robberies are solved. It's the cop shop's very own crime lab, where handwriting is analyzed, fingerprints are traced and ballistics are studied.

"Even a lot of city council members don't know about it," says Denver chief deputy district attorney Mitch Morrissey.

It's surprisingly low-key for such a rare facility. Even though Denver has had a crime lab since the 1960s, every other police department in the state has to send crime-scene evidence to the Colorado Bureau of Investigation for analysis. In 1994, the Denver unit got a modern overhaul, adding a DNA lab, a three-room suite that enables its men in white (lab coats, that is) to identify the genetic code on a blood-spattered knife or a semen-stained bedsheet. And thanks to a recent \$726,000 grant from the National Institute of Justice, the DPD will soon be able to go back in time and analyze DNA from [cold cases](#) in which there is no known suspect.

The department plans to hire two analysts whose sole mission will be to derive DNA from evidence in old sexual-assault and homicide cases. But the

grant is only for two years, so the city will eventually have to fund the extra scientists in order to continue the work.

"It's going to be a massive amount of work, even with two more people," says DNA lab forensic scientist Gregory LaBerge, who, with the help of only two other employees, already handles 350 cases a year. "Because of the media and shows like *CSI*, the public knows this stuff works. Now the administration just needs to see that."

Congress enacted a law in 1994 allowing for the creation of a national DNA database, known as the Combined DNA Index System, but left it up to the states to determine which criminals to collect genetic samples from. In some states, only convicted sex offenders have to have their DNA entered into the database, but in Colorado, all felons must have their genetic profiles uploaded. There are now almost 1.5 million DNA profiles stored in the FBI's index.

Colorado's DNA database has already helped link suspects in a couple of crimes. Genetic material from a 1999 murder matched someone who committed a felony in 2000. "Boom, we had our killer," Morrissey says.

Once DNA is filtered through a huge machine known as a genetic analyzer -- the lab has two, and the grant money will enable the purchase of six more -- the suspect's genetic code is uploaded to the state and national databases. Just like fingerprints the FBI keeps on file, genetic markers can identify an offender if he gets arrested again. Or John Doe's DNA might come up with a match before that happens. If, for example, the perpetrator of an old offense is presently serving time for another felony, the police will be able to figure out whodunit.

"My role will be to review the cases and see if we can file charges," Morrissey explains. "If we don't get a hit, we can file a John Doe warrant, where we use the DNA profile."

In preparation for the grant, the police department has already paid detectives overtime to go back and identify hundreds of old cases that have DNA evidence but no suspect for what is being referred to as the Cold Case DNA Program. The department has also expanded its lab to make way for the additional caseload. The new analysts plan to look at 500 homicides dating back forty years and 200 sexual assaults going back to 1996. (Although the statute of limitations on sex crimes was increased from seven years to ten in 2001, much of the evidence from before 1996 has already been destroyed.)

"Because of DNA, we're solving cases that twenty years ago we wouldn't have been able to," Morrissey says. "The DPD is probably the only police department in the nation that's made this kind of commitment to the science."

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