

New law aims to eliminate Washington’s rape kit backlog

Untested evidence could be key

By **AUSTIN JENKINS and MOLLY SOLOMON**
Northwest News Network

Washington state Rep. Tina Orwall still remembers the day in 2014 that she toured a police evidence facility and saw stacks of white boxes on the shelves. She asked what they were and the answer shocked her. They were untested rape kits.

“I went into my car and I cried and I just thought all of these survivors assumed we had tested their kits,” Orwall, D-Des Moines, recounted.

Back then, police and sheriff’s departments made the call on whether to send sexual assault kits to a crime lab to be tested. But bills sponsored by Orwall in 2015 and 2017 made some significant changes. They required the testing of all rape kits if the survivor agreed, established a statewide tracking system and created a task force to work on the issue. Despite those efforts, Washington’s backlog of untested

kits continued to grow.

There are more than 10,000 untested sexual assault kits in Washington, according to the Washington State Patrol.

On Tuesday, Gov. Jay Inslee signed into law yet another measure designed to address the backlog. Orwall described the bill as the “big fix.” It sets a deadline of December 2021 for the state patrol to completely eliminate the backlog. Then, beginning in 2022, the patrol would have 45 days to test any new rape kits.

Lawmakers are expected to dedicate more than \$10 million in the next state budget to fund this effort. That money would cover the cost of private labs to test older kits and pay for additional forensic scientists at the state crime labs. In addition, the state’s capital construction budget is expected to include money to match a federal grant for a new high-throughput lab in Vancouver that could test 2,000 kits a year.

“Not only does this help the current survivors, but it lets anyone ... that’s been



Molly Solomon/Oregon Public Broadcasting
Forensic scientist Laura Kelly tests a sexual assault kit at the Washington State Patrol crime lab in Vancouver.

sexually assaulted know they can come forward and that we’re going to take this seriously, we’re going to support them through this process,” Orwall said.

Some date back to the ‘90s

The Washington State Patrol crime lab in Vancouver is one of five labs across the state set up to test rape kits. At the lab, there’s a vault with a freezer behind a locked security door that holds evidence waiting to be tested. Most are sexual

cases, especially if they are property crimes or others that aren’t labeled high priority in its six-county service area.

“Some crimes we can’t look at because we just don’t have the time,” said Brad Dixon, a supervising forensic scientist in Vancouver. “We have to send them back or point them to a private lab.”

Siggins said the new high-throughput lab will be a critical part in eliminating the backlog and processing sexual assault kits more efficiently. The funding will allow Washington State Patrol to fully staff the lab with an additional eight forensic scientists, a lab technician, and a property and evidence custodian. Newer, high-tech machines and robotics will also enable staff to more quickly test multiple batches of kits.

The problem of untested rape kits has played out across the country in recent years and resulted in a national campaign called End the Backlog. Last year, Oregon announced it had cleared its backlog of nearly 5,000 rape kits. But Wash-

ington, with more than twice the number of untested kits, has struggled.

For victims, that means delayed justice. For rapists, it means the opportunity to keep victimizing. But once a kit is tested, a case that’s been stalled for years can suddenly move very quickly. That’s because the results are entered into the FBI’s national DNA database, known as CODIS. If there’s a match, police immediately have a suspect.

A match

That’s what happened earlier this year in a case involving a 12-year-old runaway who was raped during Seattle’s Torchlight Parade in 2006. Her rape kit sat for 12 years. When it was finally tested, the DNA matched a registered sex offender in Florida.

“We tested it in December and in February there were cuffs on the guy,” said Capt. Monica Alexander, of the Washington State Patrol. “It’s mind-boggling to think about the opportunity we have here to stop crime in our communities.”

FIVE-DAY FORECAST FOR ASTORIA

TONIGHT	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY
46	56 46	54 41	61 43	61 44
Mostly cloudy	Partly sunny and cooler	Partly sunny and breezy	Partly sunny	Partly sunny

ALMANAC

Astoria through Wednesday.

Temperatures

High/Low	58°/48°
Normal high/low	57°/42°
Record high	82° in 2018
Record low	31° in 1986

Precipitation

Wednesday	0.00"
Month to date	5.27"
Normal month to date	4.35"
Year to date	20.32"
Normal year to date	29.19"

SUN AND MOON

Sunset tonight	8:15 p.m.
Sunrise Friday	6:11 a.m.
Moonrise today	2:00 a.m.
Moonset today	11:00 a.m.

Last

New

First

Full

Apr 26

May 4

May 11

May 18

REGIONAL WEATHER

Shown is tomorrow's weather. Temperatures are tonight's lows and tomorrow's highs.

Forecasts and graphics provided by **AccuWeather, Inc.** ©2019

Stavebolt Bridge open to traffic

The Daily Astorian

Stavebolt Bridge on Logan Road is now open after being closed for almost two months for road maintenance.

From Monday to May 3, traffic could be impacted by shoulder work on Lewis & Clark Road and Youngs River Road and road maintenance work on Ziak Gnat Creek Road.

Oregon’s air is getting worse, report finds

Oregon Public Broadcasting

Oregon’s air is getting worse — according to a new report from the American Lung Association.

Every year, the association looks at data from federal air monitors in 900 counties. Those monitors track things like ozone and particle pollution, from fac-

tories and wildfires.

Carrie Nyssen, with the American Lung Association, said the country has seen a lot of progress over the years, but climate change is now proving a problem.

“The bad news is this year’s report really highlights the impact that warming temperatures and climate change is having on

the air quality. Specifically in the Pacific Northwest with the increase of wildfires and wildfire smoke exposure that we’re having,” Nyssen said.

Nyssen’s report found the Portland-Vancouver-Salem area is now the 23rd most polluted area in the U.S. for the kind of particles created by wildfire.

ON THE RECORD

Assault

• Around 3 p.m. on Wednesday, Wendy Watson, 33, of Seaside, was arrested by Seaside police on the 300 block of S. Holladay Drive for fourth-degree assault, menacing and harassment.

DEATHS

April 24, 2019

STUHR, Glenn Dale, 86, of Svensen, died in Knappa. Caldwell’s Luce-Layton Mortuary of Astoria is in charge of the

arrangements.

April 23, 2019

TEEVIN, Janet, 83, of Warrenton, died in Warrenton. Hughes-Ransom Mortuary is in charge of the

arrangements.

HOWE, Gordon, 86, of Warrenton, died in Warrenton. Hughes-Ransom Mortuary is in charge of the arrangements.

PUBLIC MEETINGS

THURSDAY

Columbia River Estuary Study Taskforce Council, noon, Suite 203, 818 Commercial St.
Astoria City Council, 1 p.m., work session on homelessness,

Judge Guy Boyington Building, 857 Commercial St.
Clatsop County Recreational Lands Planning and Advisory Committee, 1 to 3 p.m., fourth floor, 800 Exchange St.

Warrenton Planning Commission, 6 p.m., City Hall, 225 S. Main Ave.
Cannon Beach Planning Commission, 6 p.m., City Hall, 163 E. Gower St.

LOTTERIES

OREGON

Wednesday’s Pick 4:
1 p.m.: 7-2-9-7
4 p.m.: 3-5-4-0
7 p.m.: 3-2-9-7
10 p.m.: 8-4-3-1
Wednesday’s Lucky Lines:
3-7-10-16-20-21-27-30
Estimated jackpot: \$29,000
Wednesday’s Megabucks:

11-14-20-26-31-35
Estimated jackpot: \$2.4 million
Wednesday’s Powerball:
6-32-35-36-65, Powerball: 4
Estimated jackpot: \$166 million
WASHINGTON
Wednesday’s Daily Game:
1-7-5
Wednesday’s Hit 5: 03-31-32-

38-39
Estimated jackpot: \$150,000
Wednesday’s Keno: 03-15-17-23-28-33-34-36-40-47-48-50-53-54-66-67-68-70-77-79
Wednesday’s Lotto: 11-27-29-39-40-49
Estimated jackpot: \$7.5 million
Wednesday’s Match 4: 04-06-13-18

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The Daily Astorian publishes paid obituaries. The obituary can include a small photo and, for veterans, a flag symbol at no charge. The deadline for all obituaries is 9 a.m. the business day prior.

Obituaries may be edited for spelling, proper punctuation and style. Death notices and upcoming services will be published at no charge. Notices must be submitted by 9 a.m. the day of publication.

Obituaries and notices may be submitted online at DailyAstorian.com/forms/obits, by email at ewilson@dailyastorian.com, placed via the funeral home or in person at The Daily Astorian office, 949 Exchange St. in Astoria.

For more information, call 503-325-3211, ext. 257.

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