



Mayor, HFSC, DA, HPD Chief Announce Houston's Launch of Rape Kit Tracking

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner, the Houston Forensic Science Center, Harris County District Attorney's Office, the Houston Police Department and three regional medical centers announced Thursday that Houston will begin electronically tracking in late May "rape kits" from two large systems from the moment of evidence collection and through prosecution.

Houston will be the largest city in Texas to pilot the software being rolled out statewide in September. The tracking software is required under legislation sponsored in 2017 by Texas Rep. Donna Howard.

"Houston is leading the way on a crucial issue in the fight against sexual assaults, and with the help of HFSC, the police department, our hospitals and our district attorney, we are setting an example for all to follow," said Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner.

Texas will become one of a handful of states to implement rape kit tracking, an initiative long-supported by survivors who have said they struggle to get information about their cases.

"Houston is proud to be part of leading the way for Texas and at HFSC we believe this step goes a long way toward providing survivors with access to information about the status of their sexual assault evidence kit," said Dr. Amy Castillo, HFSC's COO and vice president.

The web-based software Texas' Department of Public Safety will use is called Track-It by STACS DNA. The portal provides each stakeholder, including the survivor, with their own password-protected view of sexual assault evidence.

The pilot will include sexual assault evidence collected in Harris Health System and the Harris County Forensic Nurse Examiners.

HFSC analyzes more than 1,000 rape kits annually, nearly all of them related to cases investigated by the Houston Police Department. However, all stakeholders _ from victim advocates to the hospitals to the medical examiner's office _ impact the overall handling of sexual assault cases. As part of an effort to improve the regional response to this sexual assault cases, HFSC has reestablished and expanded a stakeholder group that first came together to research and eliminate Houston's longstanding backlog of 6,663 rape kits. That group had been funded by a federal grant that also partially paid for the testing of the kits. The group stopped meeting when the project ended in 2015. The group, which now also includes representatives from the Harris County Sheriff's Office and the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences will meet quarterly. The first meeting was held in late March.

Finally, HFSC has been awarded an \$83,000 state grant to collect and process rape kits for 19 West Texas counties. The grant is from Texas Rep. Victoria Neave's legislation in 2017 that allows residents to donate money to rape kit testing when they get or renew their driver's license or vehicle registration.

"Houston is one of the few and lucky cities that has the capacity, with these additional funds, to help traditionally underserved, under-resourced areas more easily deal with such evidence," Dr. Castillo said. "This grant provides the funding and resources HFSC will need to process 60 kits for these areas."

HFSC is a local government corporation that provides forensic services to the City of Houston and other local agencies. HFSC is overseen by a Board of Directors appointed by the Mayor of Houston and confirmed by the Houston City Council. Its management structure is designed to be responsive to a 2009 recommendation by the National Academy of Sciences that called for crime laboratories to be independent of law enforcement and prosecutorial branches of government.

HFSC operates in seven forensic disciplines.

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