

Local district attorneys willing to help fund local DNA lab

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District attorneys in Houston and Dale counties may team up to help fund a part-time medical examiner and DNA scientist in Dothan.

Houston County District Attorney Doug Valeska said he is willing to contribute as much as \$30,000 to get someone locally to help expedite his cases and reduce the backlog.

"I need my DNA quicker," Valeska said. "I can't fund an entire salary. But if I can get one (medical examiner) on call or a part-time DNA scientist to work our cases that would help tremendously."

Dothan has been without a medical examiner since the retirement of Dr. Alfredo Paredes in 2000. Police have to travel to Mobile or Montgomery for autopsies.

Although Dothan does have a forensic lab, it is only equipped to test narcotics.

Police and district attorneys like Valeska often have to wait up to two years to get reports and lab results back.

"I wish I had that lab. I don't," Valeska said. "It's hard to look at a victim and tell them it's going to be two years."

He's had to pay to outsource key evidence to private labs to get it back in a timely manner.

"Now could I do that all the time? The answer is no," Valeska said.

Dale/Geneva County District Attorney Kirke Adams had to postpone presenting a case to the grand jury this week because he was told it would be up to a year before he got lab results back.

He gets asked all the time if there is any new information about Angela Spellman, the Ozark woman whose body was found last month after she had gone missing.

"The truth is we don't know when we will have a final report," Adams said. "That's a huge problem. There is a definite need for a lab in Dothan."

Valeska is proposing to fund some-one using money from his pretrial diversion program.

Non-violent defendants are allowed to avoid serving jail time but are assessed fees to enter

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the program.

Valeska uses those fees to help fund local victim support groups and other law enforcement efforts including the local forensics lab.

He assesses participants in his program up to \$100 which goes to fund the lab in Dothan. They have received about \$20,000 from the pre-trial diversion program.

Valeska said all of the counties in southeast Alabama would benefit from having a part-time DNA scientist and medical examiner.

Adams agrees and said he would be willing to chip in as well from his pretrial diversion funds.

"We're in the early stage of our program so it's hard to tell how much money we will have," Adams said.

"But anything we can do to help I'll be glad to do."

Coffee County District Attorney Gary McAlliley said while he applauds Valeska's willingness to step up to help solve the problem, his pretrial diversion program doesn't generate as much money as Houston and Dale counties.

Most defendants in his program only pay about \$750 in fees. He has not earmarked funds specifically for forensic sciences like Valeska has.

McAlliley said he may be willing to help contribute in the future, but has other pressing needs in his county that need to be addressed first.

"It's something we would contribute to," McAlliley said. "But there are some things I want in this circuit

more than that."

Law enforcement in his county needs a new fingerprinting system first, he said.

"We're 40 years behind as far as fingerprints," McAlliley said. "Since I have been a judge and a DA, I haven't seen 10 cases in the last 15 years made with fingerprints."

McAlliley said he doesn't think local district attorneys should be responsible for funding the Alabama Department of Forensic Sciences.

"Sure it takes us a year to get autopsy results and all of that," McAlliley said. "They badly need money. But I don't think our deferred prosecution program is the answer. They should be funded by the state Legislature."

Valeska said he can't speak for other district attorneys, but he thinks the idea could go a long way to helping improve the quality of justice in southeast Alabama.

"I can't force myself on other DAs," Valeska said. "But I would hope if they have pretrial and some revenue that they would be as concerned about this and help to fund this."