



Rape kits awaiting testing in Los Angeles before the backlog was cleared (left); rape survivor Helena Lazaro

# Passing the Test

## Cities chip in to reduce rape-kit backlog

**H**ELENA LAZARO WAS WASHING the vintage Volkswagen Rabbit she had been gifted for her 17th birthday when a man appeared next to her, brandishing a knife. He forced her into the car and made her drive to several secluded locations, where he repeatedly raped her.

After reporting the crime, Lazaro spent six hours in the hospital as DNA evidence was painstakingly collected from her body. But then her untested rape kit sat in storage for nearly a decade, as countless calls to her local sheriff's department went unreturned.

Finally, she learned that her kit had been tested and that there was a match. Her relief soon turned to outrage when she discovered that long-distance truck driver Charles Courtney Jr. had committed at least one other rape (for which he'd been convicted) since he assaulted Lazaro.

"What he did to her was exactly [what was done] to me," she says. "There could be dozens of more women out there, but we won't know until we test the kits."

Lazaro's rape kit was only one of hundreds of thousands gathering dust in storage facilities across the country. Linda Fairstein, former chief of the sex crimes unit of the Manhattan District Attorney's Office and a leading expert on violence against women, describes the backlog as a "national tragedy."

"People in law enforcement have known this problem exists and for years did nothing," she says. "It sends a dreadful message to survivors."

In Los Angeles County, where Lazaro's attack happened, there had been a backlog of nearly 13,000 rape kits. With grant assistance, the backlog has now been cleared and each new kit is processed within three months, according to the police department. Cleveland, Salt Lake City, Denver, Memphis and Houston have also worked to eliminate their backlogs. In Detroit, the work of survivor advocacy groups like the Joyful Heart Foundation has led to a city commitment to test 11,000 backlogged kits, and initial results have identified 188 serial rapists, 14

of whom have been convicted.

Peg Tallet of the Michigan Women's Foundation has raised nearly \$1 million in private donations toward testing Detroit's rape kits. "We have an opportunity to make our city safer and deliver justice to these women who wonder how they got so let down," she says.

The federal government is stepping in as well. Calling the backlog an "absolute priority," Vice President Joe Biden has announced that \$41 million in federal monies would be allocated for rape-kit testing. This will supplement a \$35 million national grant program spearheaded by the Manhattan District Attorney's Office.

Lazaro, now 35, believes each tested kit represents a victory, but that national efforts can't stop there. "If we just celebrate the funding, we're missing the bigger picture. The backlog exists because the crime of rape isn't [taken seriously enough]. A larger shift needs to happen in how we see rape and go after rapists."

—ANITA LITTLE