

When evidence travels from the CRIME SCENE the CRIME LAB

Experts tell victim advocates how processing system works

By STEPHEN FRYE Of The Oakland Press

From why some bullets turn into mushroom-shaped metal to why fingerprints cannot be pulled from wooden surfaces, victim advocates from across the state heard from the experts at the Oakland County Sheriff 's Crime Lab.

About four dozen victim advocates from throughout Michigan spent a day taking in lectures and discussing issues related to physical evidence and its journey from the crime scene to the crime lab.

The goal was to take the mystery out of the evidence processing system in order to help explain to crime victims the details of how it works.

"It helps us explain to the victim what goes on in the case," said Dan Cojanu, head of victim services at the Oakland County Prosecutor's Office.

"We want the advocates to know the misconceptions of crime scene investigations so we can explain them to the victims."

Advocates learned Friday that hollowpoint bullets will explode into a mushroom shape as the top splits backward, and nonsmooth surfaces are not good sources for fingerprints. Wood is typically too porous to retain a fingerprint.

Forensic Lab Specialist Bill Foreman explained that most thieves breaking into a home search through dresser drawers, leaving bedrooms in disarray in the search for money and jewelry.

Foreman cannot pull fingerprints off wood, but someone taking money from Bill Foreman of the Oakland County Sheriff's Office washes away chemicals that show fingerprints on duct tape. an envelope or something from a refrigerator — another common destination for thieves — can leave a print.

"I feel bad for the homeowner because it is the most disastrous thing that can happen to them," Foreman said.

But Foreman did highlight expanding databases in Oakland County that will soon include palm prints, as well as methods for pulling prints off both sides of duct tape.

Foreman said the county's experts will go wherever crimes take them, a service provided to police departments free of charge, with results coming usually within a week for typical cases.

"We're basically caught up," Foreman said.

Forensic Lab Specialist John Jacob explained in detail about how a gun barrel leaves a unique print on bullets, so affected by microscopic characteristics that it is like DNA.

"Each barrel is unique to itself," Jacob said, adding that years of use can change markings the gun leaves. "Everything that happens to that firearm causes microscopic changes to the

barrel.”

Jacob said he is more inclined to answer, “I don’t know,” when asked to compare a gun found on a suspect with a bullet recovered from a victim unless the science leaves him 100 percent sure.

“I will say it could be (the same gun), but not beyond exclusion of all others,” he said. “I will not be wrong. If I tell you it is, it is. I don’t know till I see it.”

Jacob showed his visitors what he sees, placing microscopic pictures side by side and blending them together to make a single image — a positive match.

When he finds a match, Jacob said he can tell “that cartridge came from that gun.”

“Who loaded it? Who fired it? I don’t know,” he said. “Let (the suspect) explain how that gun came into his possession.”

Jacob also showed how he tests the guns, firing them into a heavily fortified water tank in a room surrounded by 7-inch-thick walls of concrete.

The water, Jacob said, takes the bullet’s energy, allowing it to be fired and preserved without being smashed.

Margo Eby of the Common Ground Sanctuary in Oakland County said it is helpful to victims of crimes, particularly violent crimes that Common Ground sees, when someone can explain to them why analysis may take months and some evidence cannot be collected.

A victim advocate is a single source of information for a victim, a friendly face who can provide answers during a difficult time, said Leslie O’Reilly of the Michigan Crime Victim Services Commission, which runs a victim assistance academy through the Michigan State University Law School.

O’Reilly said these advanced training sessions help provide “solid knowledge of the

criminal justice system.”

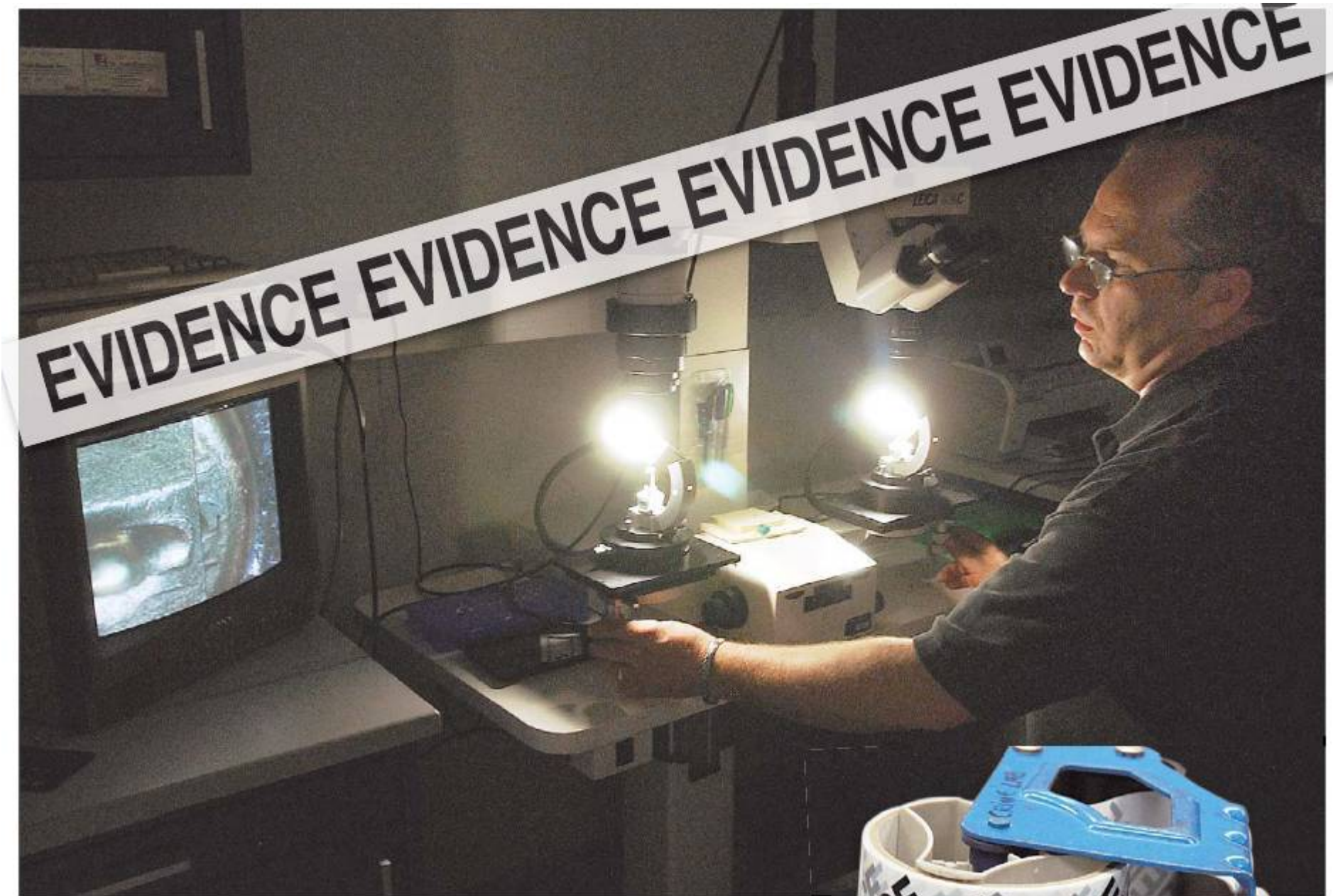
Last year, the group watched two autopsies at the Oakland County Medical Examiner’s Office to learn more about the autopsy process and what to expect from medical examiner testimony.

Group members have also heard lectures from nurses who treat rape victims.

At the Oakland County Sheriff ’s Office, the group saw explanations and examples of analysis from drugs and chemicals, shoe or boot impressions, firearms, fingerprint and palm collections, and blood spatter.

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Oakland Press photos/VAUGHN GURGANIAN

John Jacob of the Oakland County Sheriff's Office shows how he can compare markings of two bullets at the same time under a microscope.

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