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MAYOR WHARTON ANNOUNCES CITY'S LATEST STEPS TO ADDRESS SEXUAL ASSAULT KIT BACKLOG

Experts and City Officials Provide Update on Backlog, Plans to Improve Future Kit Handling

MEMPHIS, TN – Mayor A C Wharton, Jr. today announced the latest steps being taken to address a backlog of about 12,000 sexual assault kits. Those plans include creating a cross-functional taskforce, and working with the Joyful Heart Foundation to assess the City's approach to getting all backlog kits tested, getting cases investigated and prosecuted and notifying victims. Also, Mayor Wharton announced the hiring of former U.S. Attorney Veronica Coleman-Davis to help review current policies and procedures for dealing with kits collected in the future.

“Victims of sexual assault should have confidence that their voices are heard and that all resources are brought to bear in the pursuit, prosecution, and conviction of those criminals responsible for these unconscionable acts,” Mayor Wharton said. “Any backlog of untested sexual assault kits in the City of Memphis undermines this confidence, especially for those whose cases remain unsolved. The issue of untested sexual assault kits is one that we must meet head on and that is precisely what we are doing.”

New procedures for dealing with sexual assault kits were implemented in September 2013 requiring that all kits collected are sent to a lab for DNA testing. In September, Memphis had 12,164 sexual assault kits on hand needing forensic analysis. Since then, 2,226 of those kits have been sent to laboratories using \$1million in funds from the Memphis Police Department and the Tennessee Office of Criminal Justice Programs. An additional \$5.5 million is required to complete forensic analysis of the remaining kits.

“While some jurisdictions across the country discarded kits after a period of time, the Memphis Police Department has been diligent in keeping and maintaining collected evidence for decades,” Mayor Wharton said. “Unfortunately, there were no processes in place to systematically test the older kits as DNA technology evolved to do so. Now, we are gathering resources to test the backlog kits and implement best practices to ensure this does not happen again.”

A cross-functional team with representatives from law enforcement, legal and victim advocates will focus on ensuring that effective policies and procedures are implemented to:

- eliminate the backlog with dedicated testing resources
- follow leads generated from testing
- keep victims and the public informed
- develop a collection, tracking and testing process to prevent another backlog from occurring

Representatives from Joyful Heart Foundation arrived in Memphis this week to meet with local officials and victim's advocates to discuss how they can help the City. Founded by Mariska Hartigay, the Joyful Heart Foundation is a national organization that has conducted groundbreaking research identifying the extent of the nation's backlog and best practices for eliminating it, expanding the national dialogue on sexual assault kit testing through increased public awareness, engaging communities, government officials and advocating for comprehensive sexual assault kit reform legislation and policies at the local, state and federal levels. For more information visit their website www.ENDTHEBACKLOG.ORG.

"I've invited Joyful Heart representatives Sarah Tofte, Vice President of Policy & Advocacy and Liz Swavola, Manager of Policy & Advocacy to help us look with fresh eyes at what we are doing now, what we are planning to do, and offer advice," Mayor Wharton said. "They were joined via conference call by the Assistant Prosecuting Attorney for Wayne County, Mary Marrow, who was heavily involved in addressing Detroit's backlog. With their experience and expertise, we are looking to avoid pitfalls that may have been encountered by other jurisdictions and find the best practices to ensure that victims' needs are addressed and rights are preserved."

Efforts to eliminate sexual assault kit backlogs across the country have brought to light the investigative value of testing all kits, said Tofte of Joyful Heart.

"Joyful heart is honored to collaborate with Memphis to ensure comprehensive rape kit reform," Tofte said. "Testing the kits is just the first step towards justice for survivors and accountability for offenders. We know Memphis can do better by survivors and under Mayor Wharton's leadership, and in partnership with stakeholders, the city has the opportunity to provide a model of reform the nation."

Mayor Wharton said the City's partnership with Coleman-Davis, who is now in private practice, is key to ensuring the highest standards in kit handling going forward.

"Mrs. Davis brings a wealth of experience to the table and has agreed to help us review and evaluate our policies and procedures for handling sexual assault kits," Wharton said. "She will help ensure that we are taking all the necessary steps to properly maintain the integrity and viability of evidence collected in each case."

Coleman-Davis said: "We want to ensure that Memphis not only rises to the challenge of removing the backlog and setting state of the art policies and procedures in place, but also becomes a model city in its approach and outcomes."

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For more information about the Joyful Heart Foundation visit <http://www.joyfulheartfoundation.org/>, call 212-475-2026 or email Samantha Levin, Vice President of External Affairs at Samantha@JoyfulHeartFoundation.org.