

DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
Continued Funding for Forensic Chemist at the Crime Lab

Background

The Forensic Science Division's Chemistry section analyzes solid dosage drugs submitted by law enforcement. Examples include illegal street drugs, drugs produced in clandestine laboratories (primarily methamphetamine), prescription drugs, products that may have been tampered with and drugs from animal poisoning cases. The Chemistry section also analyzes gun shot residue, paint, ignitable liquids, explosives and filaments.

Workload Increases

The Crime Lab has experienced tremendous growth in the number of clandestine meth laboratories and drug cases it receives. Over the past five years, it has processed approximately 100 clandestine labs a year. These submissions are extremely dangerous and time consuming to analyze, often taking a week or longer to complete each case.

Grant Funded Chemist Position

In August 2003, the division used federal grant funds to hire a drug chemist. As of June 30, 2005, these federal funds will no longer be available.

Improved Turnaround Time and Reduced Backlogs

With the additional chemist, the turnaround time for:

- drug cases was reduced from 6 months or more, to 1½ months
- for clandestine labs was reduced from over 12 months to 10 months
- arson cases was reduced from 5 months to 3 months

Even with these improvements, these turnaround times are still not acceptable. Some jurisdictions have to settle cases before the evidence is completely analyzed or risk losing their cases due to speedy trial issues. To better support law enforcement efforts to prosecute drug cases and to meet national forensic standards, the Chemistry section's goal is to reduce turnaround times to 4 weeks or less.

Accreditation Requirements

The Crime Lab is in the process of seeking general accreditation from the American Society of Crime Lab Directors (ASCLD). The governing standards in forensics propose faster turnaround time and require that each sample be analyzed twice to make sure it has not been contaminated. Standard operating procedures for crime laboratories also include analyzing a representative sample of items in a case. Because of its backlogs, the lab has reduced the number of samples it analyzes to fewer than is generally acceptable.

While ASCLD does not dictate policy in Montana, it does set the standard for what courts accept as standard practice for the scientific community. If Montana scientists are to be considered experts in their fields in court, they must adhere to these standards.

Funding Request

This request is to continue funding the Chemist position with general funds.

	<u>FY 06</u>	<u>FY07</u>
FTE	1.0	1.0
Personal Services	\$60,293	\$60,293
Operating Expenses	<u>3,010</u>	<u>3,010</u>
Total General Fund:	\$63,303	\$63,303

2005 Legislature
February 3, 2005