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Joyful Heart Foundation: New Jersey Cities Hindering Efforts to Uncover Rape Kit Backlogs

NEW YORK – The Joyful Heart Foundation, a leader in the effort to eliminate the national rape kit backlog, today criticized law enforcement in [Atlantic City](#), [Camden](#) and [Trenton](#) for hindering efforts to obtain information about the number of untested sexual assault kits in their custody.

“The rape kit backlog represents a failure of the criminal justice system to protect survivors and hold perpetrators accountable. We can and must do better,” said Ilse Knecht, Director for Policy and Advocacy. “When the extent of a jurisdiction’s backlog is revealed, real reform can begin. When law enforcement agencies account for the untested kits in their custody, communities can begin to take steps to test those kits, hold offenders accountable and bring justice to sexual assault survivors whose cases have languished, often for years—or even decades.”

Today’s announcement is part of [The Accountability Project](#), a project of Joyful Heart’s END THE BACKLOG initiative to uncover the extent of the rape kit backlog in cities across the country. Through a pro bono partnership with Goodwin LLP, the project uses public records requests to ascertain the number of untested kits at police departments around the country.

Neither Atlantic City, Camden nor Trenton have fully responded to multiple public records requests and, worse yet, don’t appear to be motivated to make any effort to be transparent or accountable:

- **Atlantic City:** In an incomplete response to Joyful Heart’s inquiries, Atlantic City Police Department (ACPD) stated that the total number of kits collected between 2004 and 2014, and the total number of those that remain in their custody, were “unknown.” ACPD took no additional measures to attempt to provide this information. As such, there is no way to ascertain the number and testing status of rape kits in the custody of ACPD.
- **Camden:** As of November 2014, the Camden Police Department indicated that “no records exist” regarding the number of rape kits collected or stored by the police. As such, there is no way to ascertain the number and testing status of rape kits in law enforcement custody.
- **Trenton:** The Trenton Police Department (TPD) responded to Joyful Heart’s request by stating that they did not have any documentation regarding rape kits collected or submitted for testing. In December 2016, TPD denied Joyful Heart’s second FOIA request.

DNA evidence—found in sexual assault kits—is an invaluable investigative tool. Yet too often, the decision is made not to test these kits. Right now, there are hundreds of thousands of untested rape kits sitting in police and crime lab storage facilities across the country. We don’t know the true extent of the backlog nationwide because federal agencies and most state governments don’t require police departments to count or track the kits in their possession. In

fact, most times, the number of untested kits in a particular jurisdiction is unknown until journalists, survivors, or advocates step in to investigate.

Joyful Heart joins experts in calling for the mandatory submission and [testing of every rape kit](#) booked into evidence and connected to a reported sexual assault.

“Joyful Heart stands ready to provide assistance if and when law enforcement or elected officials in these cities commit to transparency in how they address the tracking and processing of their untested rape kit backlog,” added Knecht.

This work takes political will, but it also takes significant resources. Joyful Heart continues to work with partners in support of efforts to provide funding and resources to jurisdictions that are determined to comprehensively address their backlogs and implement reform. This includes the [Sexual Assault Kit Initiative](#), a federal grant program that provides local communities the resources to: test backlogged kits in their police storage facilities; create multi-disciplinary teams to investigate and prosecute cases connected to the backlog; and address the need for victim notification and re-engagement with the criminal justice system.

To learn more about The Accountability Project’s progress, and to see available data and public records responses, visit: [ENDTHEBACKLOG.ORG](#).

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The mission of the Joyful Heart Foundation is to transform society’s response to sexual assault, domestic violence, and child abuse, support survivors’ healing, and end this violence forever.
www.joyfulheartfoundation.org