

LAKE COUNTY — The Lake County Crime Laboratory is the busiest it has ever been. The lab didn't have a backlog until two or three years ago, but now the staff of 12 can't keep up with the demand from the 22 police departments in the county.

"Most of all the crimes committed, the evidence that is found, whether it is drug evidence, whether or trace evidence, blood, whatever it may be is brought to this laboratory so it is analyzing almost all of the evidence in Lake County," said Lake County Prosecutor Charles Coulson.

The lab can no longer keep up and is at risk of shutting down if it doesn't get a levy on the May ballot approved. The levy is a four tenths of a mill property tax increase, which comes out to \$14 per hundred thousand dollars of home value.

The lab hasn't had a funding increase since 1999 when it was last on the ballot. Since then, the lab has doubled in size, the operating cost has gone up and the caseload has gone up exponentially.

"We have so much coming in and they're so much more complicated than they used to be. It used to be oh, it's marijuana, oh it's cocaine, heroin, something simple, now it's fentanyl," explained lab director Linda Erdei.

Erdei says DNA testing is up 400% and drug testing is up another 200% in the last few years. Coulson says the opioid epidemic is the cause for much of the increased workload.

"I used to say half of all crime is drug-related. Today it's clearly almost 90% is drug-related," Coulson said. Erdei estimates about half of what they do is drug testing and the lab's scientists have even identified drugs never seen in the state of Ohio before.

The lab also does testing that the state crime lab doesn't do, like DNA testing for property crimes. If someone breaks into a home and steals money or jewelry, the lab will do DNA testing on anything left behind.

"In numerous situations where we've had a perpetrator that broke into many houses we've been able to find similar shoe prints and were able to confirm that that was the same person breaking into all the houses," said Erdei.

Coulson said there's also a big advantage to having a crime lab locally where he and police can work closely with scientists. He says prosecutors in other counties have to wait extended periods to get test results back from the state crime lab.

"We want evidence brought in. We want to be able to analyze the evidence immediately, get the results, give it to the police, so they can go out and arrest the person who committed the crime," he said.

Coulson says when prosecuting drug crimes and making drug busts getting drug test results back as soon as possible is key.

Erdei says she doesn't know of another crime lab in the United States that is funded with property tax and the levy on the ballot in May will make or break the future of Lake County's ability to fight crime.

"Without this laboratory, crimes that we solve would go unsolved. People that are prosecuted would be walking free," Coulson said.

If the levy is passed, Coulson says it will sustain the lab for at least 15 years and allow it to grow.

The primary elections will be held on May 8, 2018.

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