



Workshop Focuses on Rapid DNA and Disaster Victim Identification

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The explosion at a St. Louis rubber band factory resulted in a sobering number of fatalities that included workers, management, international visitors and schoolchildren. Sobering, that is, if it had been reality and not a workshop exercise at the May 2019 American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors (ASCLD) conference.

Workshop attendees learned valuable skills about handling the aftermath of a catastrophic event and the role that Rapid DNA technology can play in shaping that aftermath.

The use of Rapid DNA technology has increased in the nearly two years since the August 2017 passage of the Rapid DNA Act by Congress (see "[Rapid DNA Forum Showcases the Technology](#)," *TechBeat* January 2018), leading to the development of the May 19 Disaster Victim Identification Workshop by ASCLD's DVI Rapid DNA Subcommittee, the Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology Directorate, SNA International and the National Institute of Justice Forensic Technology Center of Excellence (NIJ FTCoE). Approximately 50 participants learned more about the technology and its uses in the morning session, then divided into seven subgroups to cycle through a scenario involving the explosion at the rubber band

factory.



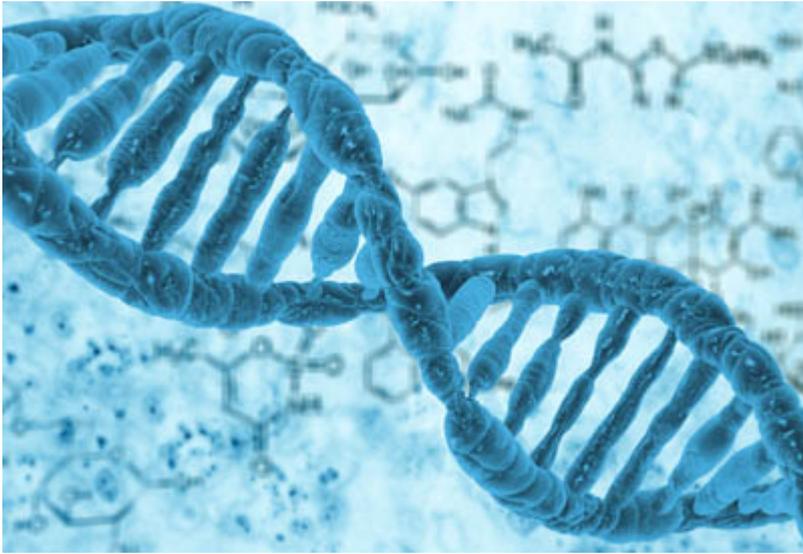
The groups worked their way through interviews with family members looking for their missing loved ones, collecting samples from family members and creating a DNA pedigree; running the reference samples through Rapid DNA analysis; conducting a briefing at the family assistance center; collecting, and then processing, post-mortem samples; and conducting kinship analysis.

“Each group had to come up its own plan of attack: how many instruments they needed, how to work with the local medical examiner’s office and various first responder groups, and so on,” says the FTCoE’s Sarah Norsworthy. “Both vendors in this field, Thermo Fisher and ANDE, provided instruments to use in the workshop, so participants learned how to use each instrument to process samples they took.”

Working with actual samples included processing post-mortem samples of human bones and tissues on a table set up in front of a portable lab set up inside a van. Participants obtained insight into how to establish that type of field operation from a representative from U.S. Customs and Border Protection. They also heard from a subject-matter expert from the National Transportation Safety Board on how to communicate with the media and with family members. At the end of the workshop, the groups assembled to review lessons learned and challenges faced.

“Since the Act passed in 2017, more and more law enforcement agencies and crime labs have been implementing the use of Rapid DNA,” says FTCoE’s Donia Slack. “We had a fantastic case presented at the workshop about its use after last summer’s Camp Fire wildfire in California (see <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/paradise-lost-inside-california-camp-fire-60-minutes/>).

ASCLD really wanted to showcase the technology and how it can be a powerful tool in identifying disaster victims.”



“The participants were very interested and engaged the whole time,” Norsworthy says, and Slack adds: “For a lot of the participants, the workshop made them realize they would have to reach out to neighboring states and labs to pull together a comprehensive response. One of the take home messages is that states and agencies need to have these preset collaborations in place beforehand instead of trying to work something out in the moment.”

Other key takeaways, Slack says, are how many players that comprehensive process involves and the need for continuing with ongoing trainings and developing consistent operating procedures.

For more information on the workshop, visit this [link](#), or go [here](#) and follow the links. Other sponsors of the workshop, held at the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department, included the Florida Emergency Mortuary Operations Response System (FEMORS) and the Missouri Mortuary Operations Response Team (MO MORT).

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