NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

NEWSDAY, TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 2001

City to Build Forensic Lab

By Robert Polner
STAFF WRITER

A $247-million forensic biology laboratory is to be built in Manhattan, allowing law-enforcement authorities to expand the use of genetic material for crime investigations, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani said yesterday.

Giuliani and the city medical examiner, Charles Hirsch, broke ground on the center, which is to open at Bellevue Hospital Center near the end of 2004.

Their announcement comes as the city has stepped up its use of DNA technology to identify victims of the World Trade Center attacks. Of the 450 victims identified so far, 50 have been confirmed solely through DNA, Hirsch said.

"DNA analysis has proven to be an indispensable tool in the fight against crime," Giuliani said.

He said the new lab will "solidify our status as the nation's forerunner in the use of this technology."

The lab will handle 100,000 cases a year.

In Britain, the tracing of genetic material in laboratories has helped police solve not only rape and homicide cases, but also property crimes — as when genetic clues, but not fingerprints, can be gleaned from the steering wheel of a recovered stolen car.

The city used DNA technology in the investigation of 30,000 crimes in 1999, the latest year for which data are available, compared to 12,000 nationwide by the FBI, Giuliani said.

Hirsch received a standing ovation from members of his staff who gathered under a pitched tent outside Bellevue. He has been a commanding presence in the tense and exhausting weeks since the Sept. 11 attacks.

His eyes teared as he praised his colleagues for their "compassion" and hard work.

Hirsch also offered that the new center should be engraved with the motto, "Science in the Service of Justice."

The city will pay for the 13-story lab with state-financed bonds, and it will also include space for an updated emergency medical service center to replace an aging one at the hospital.

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