Local

Maryland’s untested rape kits, Baltimore’s sex assault investigations are shameful


We know that in New Mexico, 5,409 rape victims who were swabbed, tested and examined in a hospital — holding still while strangers gathered evidence from their bodies — never got justice.

In Michigan, the number was 15,217.

In Virginia, 2,369 of these rape evidence kits were carefully harvested from victims and then filed away, stuck in storage and otherwise forgotten, while the rapists roamed free.

We know this because of a nationwide effort to get federal funding and state legislation to address this heinous backlog of neglect, indifference and injustice.

It was led by the Joyful Heart Foundation, founded by “Law and Order: Special Victims Unit” actress Mariska Hargitay, and championed by Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski, the Democrat from Maryland.

Now here’s the part that’s stunning. While 31 states got their act together, figured out how many unexamined rape kits they had and applied for the federal money to start testing them, Maryland is dragging behind. It, along with 18 other states, still has no idea how many rape kits are in its backlog, according to the foundation.

Mikulski must be furious.

Last year, she stood in a Maryland State Police crime lab with Biden after they secured $41 million to test the shameful backlog of about 400,000 rape kits across the nation.

“We want to make sure that no victim is doubly victimized, one, by the violent predator who attacks her, and then also by the system that neglects her,” Mikulski said then.

I tried to ask her about Maryland’s lackluster response, but her staff said she was traveling and couldn’t respond.

That’s okay. I’ll be furious for her. We’re both short and loud. This will work.

I mean, Maryland, honestly. Look across the river at Virginia, the state usually in trouble with women, trying to order transvaginal probes and all that.

[Virginia lawmakers’ womb obsession is hard to fathom]

Virginia got moving immediately, quickly reporting its rape kit backlog of 2,369 and securing $1.4 million in federal grants to test them. The District, it turns out, has no backlog at all.

But, Maryland, what gives?
State legislation was passed in April 2015 to get the backlog counted, but the counties and cities were given until this December to tally up their untested kits, according to the bill. Most states took six months to get their audits done and start testing the backlog. Some have already prosecuted ancient cases.

The problem is most acute in Baltimore, this month’s Exhibit A for bad police behavior.

Baltimore is a city of ghost rapes, apparently.

For years, the Baltimore Police Department led the nation in the number of rape and sexual assault cases that were simply dismissed as unfounded. But some of those cases — a paltry 15 percent between 2010 and 2014, according to a U.S. Justice Department report this month — left something behind to haunt the city. Those rape kits full of evidence.

And what’s Baltimore doing about those kits? Ignoring them.

“We know from our work that there are too many Baltimores in America today — from Detroit to San Diego, Cleveland to Charlotte, Las Vegas to Memphis,” said Sarah Haacke Byrd, the managing director of the Joyful Heart Foundation.

Byrd and others knew that Baltimore has a history of ignoring sex crimes.

In 2010, the Baltimore Sun looked into the city’s bizarre lack of investigated rape cases and found that police dismissed rape and sexual assault charges at alarming rates by systematically shaming victims, abusing, belittling and aggressively questioning them until they went away.

And those were the ones who got the honor of an investigation. Four out of 10 calls reporting rape didn’t even get a report.

Six years later, things are no better in Charm City.

The scathing Justice Department report on policing in Baltimore included hideous examples of what police really thought of sexual assault victims.

They found emails from a prosecutor on a sexual assault case who wrote that “this case is crazy ... I am not excited about charging it. This victim seems like a conniving little whore (pardon my language).” The Baltimore officer replied, “Lmao! I feel the same.”

[Baltimore prosecutor on woman reporting rape: ‘Seems like a conniving little whore.’]

A detective in the sexual crimes unit, according to the Justice Department report, was heard at a party saying that “in homicide, there are real victims; all our cases are bulls---.”

Knowing what they were dealing with, the folks at the Joyful Heart Foundation submitted a Freedom of Information Act request for Baltimore’s 2015 numbers. They got some, but it was a jumble of incoherent and incongruous paperwork.

It basically said what victims have thought all along: “We don’t care.”

Too many sexual assaults have two acts. There’s the attack itself, then the revictimization by police and prosecutors who blame or dismiss victims.

About 65 percent of rapes and sexual assaults are never reported in this country, according to a 2012 report by the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Why?

“Belief that the police would not do anything to help,” according to the report, as well as “Belief that the police could not do anything to help.”

In Maryland and its largest city, the evidence is clear that they’re right.