

New crime scene lab streamlines investigations

Mobile sheriff's unit is stocked with high-tech forensic equipment.

BY SHANNON O'BOYE
STAFF WRITER

Broward County Sheriff's Office crime scene investigators respond to about 70 homicides a year.

They photograph the crime scenes and collect and process evidence like fingerprints, clothing fibers, hair, blood and other fluids. They work in cities all over the county, including many that have their own police departments and homicide detectives.

And they just got a new mobile crime scene lab that will help them do their jobs faster and better.

The \$321,000, 40-foot vehicle, paid for with surplus funds from the County Commission, looks and feels a lot like a camper. It's long and narrow and equipped with a coffee maker, a microwave, a fridge and a toilet.

But it also holds a cache of high-tech forensic equipment, cameras, laptop computers, phones and fax machines that cater to both crime scene investiga-



ON THE CASE: The Broward Sheriff's Office's new mobile crime lab is 40 feet long and costs \$321,000. Staff photo/Lou Toman

tors and homicide detectives.

Toward the front, there's a sealed Superglue chamber that detectives such as James Kinney use to lock fingerprints onto pieces of evidence. When Superglue is heated, it turns into a vapor that will adhere to the ridges of fingerprints, securing them to just about anything—guns, knives, beer bottles, glasses, light bulbs. Kinney can hand the evidence off to David Knoerlein, a forensic analyst, to photograph the prints with a

digital camera, download the images onto a laptop computer and work on enhancing them.

"With the digital imaging station, we can enhance the prints, send them back to the lab and do an AFIS [Automated Fingerprint Identification System] search all before we've left the scene," said Sgt. James Kammerer, who took the leading in designing the new mobile unit. "That used to take us a day or so."

Next to Knoerlein's workstation are

two lasers, one used to view latent fingerprints and one for bullet trajectory analysis.

The 15 members of the crime scene unit had been working with a similar vehicle since 1995, but it was half the size of the new one. Equipment was stacked in the aisles and there wasn't much room for homicide detectives to work.

Now detectives have an air-conditioned conference room where they can interview witnesses and victims, watch crime scene video, tap into the state driver's license database to print pictures of possible suspects, draw up warrants and fax them to the State Attorney's Office.

The new mobile lab has another nice feature, said Detective Mark Suchomel, one of four people trained to drive it. "If you're out at 2, 3, 4 in the morning and starting to get a little punchy, it's nice to get a cup of coffee without having to leave," he said. "It's also nice not to have to jump in a van and drive somewhere to find a bathroom."

Shannon O'Boye can be reached at soboye@sun-sentinel.com or 954-356-4597.