

<http://www2.timesdispatch.com/news/2010/aug/04/dnaa04-ar-411738/>

Richmond Times-Dispatch

Published: August 04, 2010

[Home](#) / [news](#) / [local](#) /

Familial DNA hunt sought in East Coast rape case

By Frank Green | TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

A top Virginia prosecutor thinks a forensic technique not being used by the state might end the 13-year career of the so-called East Coast rapist who attacked two teenagers in Dale City last Halloween. Prince William County Commonwealth's Attorney Paul B. Ebert said he was surprised to learn recently that while state authorities looked into familial DNA searching three years ago, there has been no further consideration of the procedure in Virginia.

A top Virginia prosecutor thinks a forensic technique not being used by the state might end the 13-year career of the so-called East Coast rapist who attacked two teenagers in Dale City last Halloween.

Prince William County Commonwealth's Attorney Paul B. Ebert said he was surprised to learn recently that while state authorities looked into familial DNA searching three years ago, there has been no further consideration of the procedure in Virginia.

He said he will ask the Virginia Association of Commonwealth's Attorneys to request that Gov. Bob McDonnell's administration implement the procedure as quickly as possible.

Ebert noted there may be privacy and cost concerns to overcome. But, he said the state has long been a leader in the forensic use of DNA and, "I don't know why Virginia . . . would not adopt that procedure."

The prosecutors group holds its annual meeting in Virginia Beach this week. Neil S. Vener, the Campbell County commonwealth's attorney and current president of the association, said Ebert's request is on tomorrow's agenda.

Proponents of the procedure say no new legislation is required, while the Virginia attorney general's office said it is not clear whether a new law would be needed.

...

Familial DNA searching is used when a standard search fails to match a crime-scene DNA profile with a profile in databases of offenders or arrestees. A near match, however, might indicate close relatives of the suspect and serve as leads for detectives.

Though there are no technical or legal bars, the procedure has raised privacy and other concerns; only California and Colorado regularly conduct them.

The Virginia Department of Forensic Science said it has not been asked to look into nonscientific issues surrounding familial searching.

The technique led to last month's arrest of Lonnie Franklin Jr. in connection with 10 murders in the "Grim Sleeper" killings that terrorized Los Angeles for 25 years.

Police were led to Franklin through his son's DNA; his son had been arrested on unrelated charges.

Roughly half the people in jails and prisons in the U.S. have a close family member who also has been locked up and likely will have a recorded DNA profile.

Ebert said he believes familial searching could help identify the East Coast rapist, who is believed to have attacked 19 women from 1997 to last year in Virginia, Maryland, Rhode Island and Connecticut.

The most recent known attacks were against three teenage girls in Dale City in eastern Prince William on Oct. 31. They had been trick-or-treating when the attacker, armed with a handgun, raped two of them.

DNA testing links the East Coast rapist attacks to the same person, but his profile does not match that of any offender in criminal databases.

However, familial searching might turn up a close relative, and Ebert thinks that's a chance worth taking.

...

Mitchell R. Morrissey, the district attorney for Denver and a proponent of familial searching, agrees with Ebert about the potential for using it in the East Coast rapist case.

"It's tailor-made for this," Morrissey said. "Here's a very specific example of where they should at least try."

Denver and California have developed software that aids in familial searches. The search for a close relative also is narrowed greatly by additional, Y-STR DNA testing.

Morrissey said Denver's software is available to any jurisdiction willing to comply with appropriate protocols and precautions. "We have this thing, and there's no reason for anybody to re-create the wheel," he said.

"This is developed by people that have been going into court and litigating DNA for 20 years, 25 years," he said.

In Colorado, it has helped to track down a dozen suspects but thus far has resulted in just one successful prosecution -- a man who cut himself while breaking into cars.

"Obviously the Grim Sleeper was a huge step forward and the first major case in the United States where it was used, but ours was the first case," Morrissey said.

According to Prince William police, the East Coast rapist has attacked women in different areas at

various times during the past 13 years. It is believed he lived in, spent a considerable amount of time in, or was otherwise familiar with the areas of the attacks.

He has targeted black, Hispanic and white females, ranging from teenagers to women in their early 40s. He is described by victims as a black male of medium build, probably in his 30s or 40s.

"People who may know the offender may not think that he is capable of committing these crimes. However, any information may be helpful in identifying or eliminating potential suspects," the Prince William police website says.

Morrissey said familial searching may not turn up anything in the case. But, he said, he is sure police are running down all sorts of unlikely leads in their search for the rapist.

Any leads that familial searching might turn up will be based on science, genetics and statistics and likely will be much stronger than those phoned in on tip lines, he said.

Contact Frank Green at (804) 649-6340 or fgreen@timesdispatch.com.

Richmond Times-Dispatch © Copyright 2009 Media General Communications Holdings, LLC. A Media General company.