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Panel urges state to hire more DNA lab technicians

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A state criminal justice reform panel urged lawmakers to provide emergency funding to hire more crime lab technicians who face a huge backlog of DNA samples that could help catch criminals and exonerate the innocent.

The California Commission on the Fair Administration of Justice report released Tuesday underscored growing concern among authorities, defense attorneys and others that the state has fallen behind in testing DNA from convicted felons, certain misdemeanor offenders and those arrested on suspicion of rape or murder.

As of Jan. 31, more than two years after voter-supported Proposition 69 authorized expansion of DNA testing, the California Department of Justice had profiled about 740,000 swab samples but still had a backlog of almost 160,000 samples, the report said.

Although the backlog is expected to be less than 60,000 by midyear, officials anticipate receiving 240,000 new samples annually, the report said.

By 2009, when samples will be required from every adult arrested on felony charges, the number will rise to 400,000 a year, according to the report.

"This is an issue where people are remaining in custody who shouldn't be, and people who should be in custody are out on the streets," said Gerald Uelmen, a Santa Clara University law professor and the commission's executive director.

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