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L.A. County sheriff says budget cuts have slowed agency's analysis of drug evidence

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By Robert Faturechi, Los Angeles Times

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Los Angeles County Sheriff Lee Baca says budget cuts have significantly slowed his agency's analysis of narcotics evidence.

The average backlog in 2009, before the cuts, was 256 cases. That number has more than tripled, swelling to 920 unanalyzed cases, according to department records.

Baca recently reduced overtime expenses in an effort to compensate for a \$128-million budget cut. News of the narcotics backlog comes weeks after The Times detailed significant delays in the department's collection and analysis of fingerprint evidence. The department also recently drew attention when it released some 200 inmates from the L.A. County jail system early as part of an attempt to reduce costs.

The narcotics testing backlog was disclosed in a report Baca submitted to the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors last week. The report did not provide a detailed accounting of the backlog, but a sheriff's spokesman said that cases investigated by the department have not been affected by the cuts. Instead, the brunt of the problem seems to have been push onto other law enforcement agencies in the county that outsource their narcotics analysis to the Sheriff's Department, authorities said.

Alex Perenishko, a detective with the Monrovia Police Department, said sheriff's analysts used to return results in a week or two but now take up to a month on average. The relatively small agency sends evidence — such as OxyContin pills or rock cocaine — to the Sheriff's Department to determine its contents.

"It'd be nice if it was quicker," Perenishko said. "We'd be able to answer the courts' questions faster."

In response to the ballooning backlog, sheriff's spokesman Steve Whitmore said the department recently approved allowing some overtime for narcotics analysis in order to get the number of cases down to a "manageable" number.

Narcotics analysis requires extensive training, Baca said in a written report to the Board of Supervisors last week. Department employees trained to do that analysis, the sheriff said, used to

handle the load by working overtime.

"The Department continues to experience operational impacts, especially within critical support and investigative units," Baca said in his report.

Sheriff's officials say cost-saving measures have put them on track to meet their budget-reduction goals — but not without sacrifice. Restrictions on overtime, for example, were shown last month to have significantly slowed fingerprint collection and analysis, often resulting in the destruction of potentially vital evidence.

The lag has delayed dozens of homicide investigations. It's also forced burglary victims to wait longer to have their homes or cars fingerprinted. In May, more than 120 burglary victims decided they couldn't continue preserving the crime scene, calling the Sheriff's Department to cancel fingerprinting altogether.

Cuts have also affected air support, according to Baca's report, with more than 150 requests from patrol units on the ground going unanswered during a two-week span in June.