

JEHT Foundation Funds Eyewitness Identification Field Studies

Despite over thirty (30) years of laboratory results conducted by Dr. Gary Wells and his colleagues, police departments have been hesitant to change well-established procedures based on laboratory findings alone. Many departments have used a well-publicized but flawed study conducted in Illinois as a reason not to test new and promising methods. Additionally, there has been no universal application, or widespread adoption, of eyewitness identification procedures that integrate the growing body of psychological knowledge and social science research with the practical perspectives and demands of day-to-day law enforcement. "These field studies represent a unique collaboration between police, social scientists, institutes, and centers across the country to test new ways to improve the reliability of eyewitness evidence," said Wells. "These are likely to be the most important and informative studies ever conducted on eyewitness identification," Wells continued.

The Study will be conducted at four distinct, geographically diverse sites across the nation and is headed by primary scientists Dr. Wells, Dr. Roy S. Malpass, Dr. Brian Cutler, Dr. Nancy Steblay, and Dr. Jennifer Dysart. Other scientists involved in the Study include: Dr. Steve Penrod, Dr. Steve Clark, Dr. Margaret Kovera, and Dr. Lori Van Wallendael. The first study began in Charlotte, North Carolina, in January. Three additional sites will be chosen in the early stages of this project. In each of the sites under consideration, law enforcement leadership and prosecutors have expressed a strong interest in participating in the Study in order to improve the reliability of identifications. Implementation of the Study in four sites will result in a total of 1600 cases being tracked. Law enforcement departments representing 4,750 law enforcement and support personnel will be invested in the Study and its findings.

Upon conclusion of the field studies and production of a final report of the Study findings, the AJS Commission on Forensic Science and Public Policy will convene to review and endorse the Study findings and issue recommendations for the future conduct of eyewitness identification procedures. The Commission will make a major public statement on the Study findings and resulting policy recommendations. AJS will seek the full and active participation of all project partners and allied organizations in supporting, endorsing, and publicizing the Study findings and recommendations.

The Study aligns closely with the purpose of the JEHT Foundation's Criminal Justice Program "to bring the latest research and best practices to bear on efforts to make the criminal justice system a more effective mechanism for insuring public safety and guaranteeing fairness to individuals." The Study will provide criminal justice and law enforcement communities across the nation a unique and timely opportunity to "get it right" through targeted field research demonstrating the practical application of lab-proven eyewitness identification techniques and processes.

*Established in 2000, the JEHT Foundation name stands for Justice, Equality, Human dignity, and Tolerance, the core values underlying the Foundation's mission.