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**HEADLINE:** EDITORIAL: Justice, science don't come cheap

**BODY:** Louisiana has long had a history of putting its money into building more prison cells to keep pace with mandatory sentences and other societal factors that make us the nation's per capita incarceration leader.

Meanwhile, we sometimes skimp by on the cost of making sure justice is done.

Money spent on defense of the poor is but a fraction of the dollars at the disposal of parish prosecutors. Overwhelmed public defenders have been duly noted in reports and lawsuits. Yet indigent defense continues to bubble along beneath most law-abiding citizens' radar. The momentum for reform that was building prior to hurricanes Katrina and Rita was another worthy cause slowed by the focus on storm recovery.

More recently, publicity has been on the need for additional dollars for the scientific evaluation of evidence that can help ensure the right suspects are being prosecuted. Correcting this shortfall, fortunately, seems more within reach as lawmakers get ready to convene.

North Louisiana Criminalistics Laboratory needs \$1 million in operating dollars to bolster its staff now and in anticipation of moving into a new location near LSU Health Sciences Center. Locked into a budget that depends on a fluctuating source — traffic tickets — the local crime lab that serves 29 parishes has struggled to keep pace. Since its traffic fine fee structure — \$10 per moving violation — was instituted more than a decade ago, the lab has faced an explosion in drug and DNA testing. DNA testing in particular is expensive.

The Crime Lab Commission and LSUHSC have made a good faith effort at helping the state squeeze more out of taxpayer dollars. LSUHSC provided the land for a new forensic crime center that will both provide ready access for autopsies to local investigators as well as a training ground for doctors training in the forensic sciences. Win-win, they call it.

Previous legislative sessions have yielded the \$15 million needed to construct the building. There also are efforts to secure additional capital dollars from Washington, which has been lavishing buckets of money across the nation for boats and robots in the name of Homeland Security. But a steady source of operational dollars for crime labs is needed for salaries and supplies. Even before that new center opens, the crime lab needs two more DNA technicians.

Whether it's attorneys defending the poor or local crime lab technicians overseeing "CSI: Mansfield," citizens and lawmakers must decide that criminal justice can't operate on the cheap.