It was a week before Christmas and most people in Houston were preparing for the upcoming holiday. Shopping, cooking, baking, planning.

But Dequan Donte Anderson’s family mourned. Anderson had been shot and killed as he left his workplace, a Dollar General in north Houston, to make a cash deposit at a bank. A gunman shot Anderson after he tried to fight off an attempt to steal the bag of cash. The suspect ran off with the cash.

The victim, Anderson, hit a median as he tried to get away. Anderson was declared dead at the hospital.

Police arrived to a chaotic crime scene. Surveillance footage, a car, a store. But no suspect nearby. And this is where forensics can be crucial. Is there DNA? Surveillance footage? Fingerprints? What evidence can help track down the suspect? And how quickly can investigators get the information so they can make an arrest?

The key is timing. The sooner law enforcement has the information, the more likely they are to make an arrest.

“At HFSC we fully understand our work is only useful if we are able to provide it to stakeholders when they need it most,” said Dr. Peter Stout, HFSC’s CEO and president. “It is why we are constantly looking for ways to further improve both the quality and efficiency of our work.”

And in this case, efficiency paid off.

HFSC’s Crime Scene Unit responded to the scene to collect evidence. A crime scene investigator lifted fingerprints off the victim’s vehicle. An audio/video analyst retrieved surveillance footage.

Just after Christmas, Houston Police Department investigators requested HFSC’s latent print examiners rush the comparisons. Two examiners stayed late to complete the work and provide the investigator with their findings.

An audio/video analyst enhanced a license plate.

The fingerprint found on the vehicle helped HPD investigators place the suspect at the scene, make an arrest and have charges filed by the district attorney.

“The print ... was linked through other investigative leads and was instrumental in solving this case,” HPD Sgt. Matthew Brady said in an email to the latent print examiner who worked on the comparison.
A Few Words From Our President

Dr. Peter Stout, CEO/President

Houston has been plagued this year with significant weather events, from a hurricane to a deep freeze, that impacted daily life.

The Houston Forensic Science Center is no exception. HFSC shut down and lost five production days during Hurricane Harvey. Just a few months later, in what we can now call "icecopalypse 2018," we had to again close for two days.

Now, HFSC must stop issuing reports from five sections between February 28 and March 4 so it can transition to an independent computer network.

Necessary, but painful.

But, just as we are obliged to improve technology to provide customers with a better work product, we also have an obligation to ensure staff can get to and from work safely.

In Houston this year, this hasn’t always been possible.

Unlike some other companies, a good chunk of HFSC’s work cannot be done remotely, such as lab activities. For some of the work we do we need access to sensitive databases overseen by federal agencies.

As such, these events have a real impact on production, and ultimately lead to lengthier turnaround times, and potentially backlogs.

This month, our turnaround times are higher nearly across the board due to the lost production days. That trend will continue as we transition to a new LIMS.

In the long-term, however, the benefit will be clear. So please be patient as we overcome some hurdles.

Peter Stout, PH.D.
CEO/President

The Houston Forensic Science Center is still working through two longstanding backlogs: latent prints and DNA.

As analysts work their way through the oldest cases, it appears the turnaround time has increased. That is a bit of an illusion because turnaround time is calculated based on cases that have been closed and the time they have been open. As such, the older the cases in the backlog the higher the turnaround time appears.

To provide a better view of the work being done, the above graphic shows the average turnaround time without latent prints. That backlog should be eliminated by the end of 2018. Once HFSC has eliminated all backlogs, data will better reflect the work being done.

For more information, please visit the HFSC website at www.houstonforensicscience.org
Anthony Graves, a member of the Houston Forensic Science Center’s Board of Directors, has published a book sharing his personal story. Mr. Graves had been wrongfully convicted of six murders. He was exonerated after spending 18 years in prison, 12 of them on death row.

Anthony Graves’ story is one of resilience in the face of injustice,” U.S. Senator Richard Durbin of Illinois is quoted as saying on the cover of the book, Infinite Hope. “For 12 years, Anthony was silenced and isolated (on death row.) Now he has found his freedom and his voice. Infinite Hope speaks powerfully of the need for reform. By telling his story, Anthony calls on all of us to prevent these injustices from being repeated.”

Anthony Graves, an HFSC board member, tells in his newly published book, “Infinite Hope: How Wrongful Conviction, Solitary Confinement and 12 Years on Death Row Failed to Kill My Soul.”

Graves’ ordeal began August 18, 1992. He was on a date. But not far away a grandmother, a teenager and four children under the age of 10 were brutally murdered in the small town of Somerville, Texas.

Quickly, the gruesome beating and stabbing deaths became the talk of this town of 1,300 people tucked in the soft, rolling hills 90 miles north of Houston.

Until then, the town might have been known for its proximity to Texas A&M University _ about 25 miles _ or, possibly, how close it is to the Blue Bell ice cream factory, barely 15 miles. Now, this murder consumed the town, and authorities had to make an arrest.

The 26-year-old Graves, busy with his own life and family _ picking up friends, dating, working _ responded as most people did when they heard of the gruesome crime. He hoped the perpetrators would be caught.

He never dreamed that police, after a false confession from another suspect, would arrest him five days after the incident and eventually charge him with capital murder.

Graves would remain imprisoned until 2010.

Today, nearly 26 years after the murders that changed Graves’ life, he understands he was a victim of a faulty system. He is committed to helping others who may be facing a similar fate, in part by serving on the board of directors of the Houston Forensic Science Center.

Serving alongside one of the attorneys who helped exonerate him, Nicole Casarez, Graves’ mere presence on the board is a constant reminder of why the work done by HFSC is crucial to the justice system.

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“For 12 years, Anthony was silenced and isolated (on death row.) Now he has found his freedom and his voice. Infinite Hope speaks powerfully of the need for reform. By telling his story, Anthony calls on all of us to prevent these injustices from being repeated.”
The Houston Forensic Science Center has notified the state commission that oversees and accredits the profession that it had terminated an employee for what it suspects is professional misconduct.

The January incident involved an analyst who had shredded original case notes from a homicide scene, a violation of HFSC policy and procedure. The incident will be officially disclosed to the Texas Forensic Science Commission ahead of its next meeting in April.

“HFSC will not tolerate the potential of professional misconduct and takes seriously any mishaps that may impact a criminal investigation,” said Dr. Peter Stout, HFSC’s CEO and president.

“For this reason, we have strong quality systems in place and we are satisfied they worked as intended in this incident,” Dr. Stout said.

Initial errors came to light during a routine technical review of a case report from a homicide scene. To correct the errors, most of which were administrative in nature, the analyst completed during two years of employment with HFSC.

At the last TFSC meeting on February 2, the commissioners decided to take no further action on two previous disclosures.

One disclosure also involved an incident in the audio/video section in which an analyst inadvertently retrieved the wrong video from a device. By the time the error was discovered and the analyst returned to the scene, the device had overwritten the original recording.

The other disclosure involved dozens of errors made by a Crime Scene Investigator who is no longer on HFSC’s staff. Those errors impacted more than 60 cases, including dozens of homicides and several officer-involved shootings. The TFSC was satisfied with the steps taken by HFSC to remedy the problem and prevent similar issues going forward.

However, upon returning from the homicide scene the second time, the analyst instead recreated the notes on a new sheet of paper and rather than preserving the original version, shredded the document.

The analyst was terminated on January 24 following an internal investigation. HFSC notified the Harris County District Attorney’s Office and the Houston Police Department of the incident.

The disclosure to the TFSC will include at least partial findings from an audit of the more than 100 cases the analyst completed during two years of employment with HFSC.

Before continuing with the “go live” schedule to get additional disciplines into the new LIMS, HFSC is configuring an application programing interface (API) from the LIMS vendor, JusticeTrax. This is a critical component that will allow for communication between HFSC’s LIMS and the software stakeholders use to make requests.

Until the API is completed, HFSC personnel have been manually entering requests, a time-consuming endeavor that stretches already tight resources. With three disciplines already live in the new LIMS, it would be impossible to bring additional areas into the new environment until data entry is automated, which could occur in March.

Meanwhile, the LIMS team is also preparing the remaining disciplines for operations in the new LIMS. Stakeholders will not be impacted by this pause in the transition to the new LIMS.
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