

# WHAT'S NEWS @ HFSC

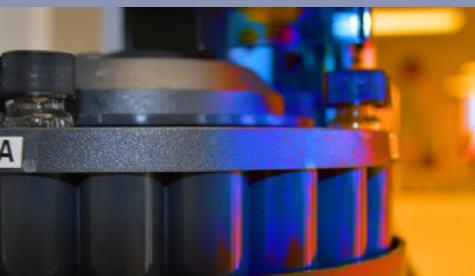
HOUSTON FORENSIC SCIENCE CENTER • MAY 2017

## HFSC's Blind Quality Program: What is it? And What Does it Mean for Houston?

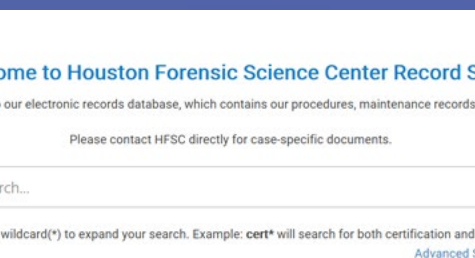
### INSIDE THIS EDITION



**2** Our mission to be transparent and why



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The Houston Forensic Science Center has received a lot of attention and many accolades for a unique blind quality control program. But why would that be and why should Houstonians care?

The blind quality control program is comprised of two parts: testing and verification. In the blind testing portion we slip “test” cases into the workflow without analysts knowing. This means that at any given time an analyst has no idea whether they are working on a real case or taking a test. Clearly, this allows us to “test” the ability and function of the analysts, but because the “test” case is taking the same journey as real casework we are also testing our system and process. It allows us to uncover mistakes and bottlenecks, evaluate equipment performance and continuously improve our work and efficiency. Blind verification means that in disciplines where an analyst’s work is then verified by a second person \_ such as firearms \_ that second examiner does not know what conclusion the first analyst reached. It makes the verification more objective, while also testing the consistency of our final product.

We now have some level of blind quality controls in five of our eight disciplines, making the program unique in size and scope. Our goal is to expand the program across all sections.

So what does this mean for the justice system and the community? On the most basic level the blind testing program provides additional confidence in the city’s forensic services. It means there are checks in place constantly looking for irregularities and areas for improvement, ensuring the work done in the laboratory is truly of the highest quality.

But that isn’t all.

The blind verifications also allow us to remove a layer of potential bias. Research has shown that when one analyst has the results of the previous examiner it can “bias” their findings and make them lean toward agreeing with the initial conclusion.

Our analysts are also able to testify to their findings with greater confidence. The fact that they don’t know whether they are being tested is a bonus, but they will also be able to offer a statistical value to our error rate as the program expands and we are able to introduce more and more challenging “test” cases into the workflow.

The program does cost money and resources, but we have found the pros outweigh the cons. The cost of a wrong answer is not only a potential multimillion dollar settlement to a person wrongfully convicted, it can destroy a person’s life. It leaves the bad guy out on the street. And it means the community cannot trust an important part of the justice system. Blind quality controls help eliminate some of those risks.





# A Few Words From Our PRESIDENT

HOUSTON FORENSIC SCIENCE CENTER



**Peter Stout, PH.D.**  
CEO/President


The Houston Forensic Science Center disclosed to the state's forensic oversight commission in April about a series of errors that occurred in our Crime Scene Unit that impacted 65 cases. Once we made that disclosure to the Texas Forensic Science Commission we immediately issued a news release to the media detailing the errors along with the findings of our internal audit that uncovered the problems.

While this level of transparency has not been unusual for us at HFSC, it is not common in many crime labs, and we know it still likely raises an eyebrow. In the short term, it certainly can appear to make life difficult.

So why our commitment to transparency?

First, our most important stakeholder and the folks we really work for are the residents of Houston, or the community. We owe them quality, reliable, objective forensic science that will help make their communities safer. And we owe them the truth when we don't succeed, as well as an explanation.

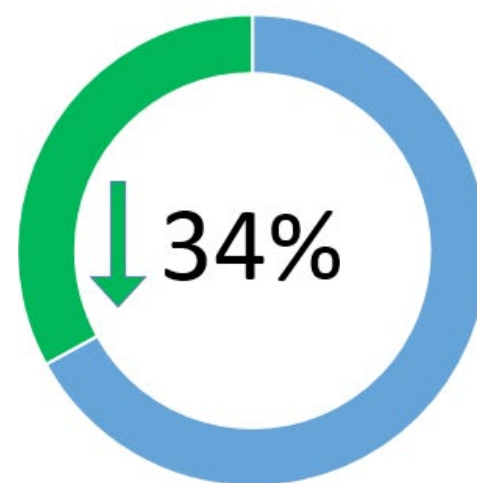
Second, we will make mistakes. That is a fact. However, the only way to ensure we don't repeat the same mistakes is to thoroughly review those errors to improve our systems and processes. Part of doing that successfully requires a level of transparency that may not have existed in the past. We believe that despite some short-term pain created by being open, everyone will benefit in the future.

  
Peter Stout, PH.D.  
CEO/President

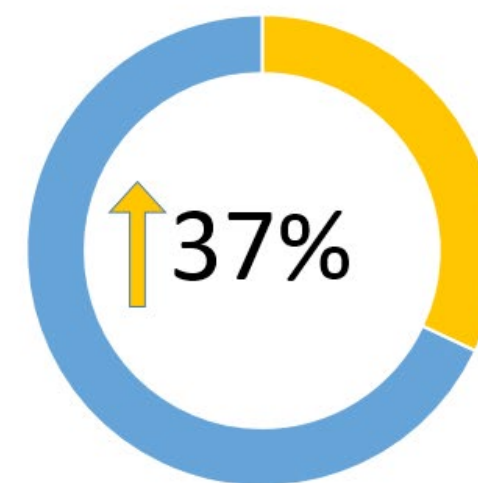
# HFSC At A Glance

## Last 12 months compared to prior 12 months

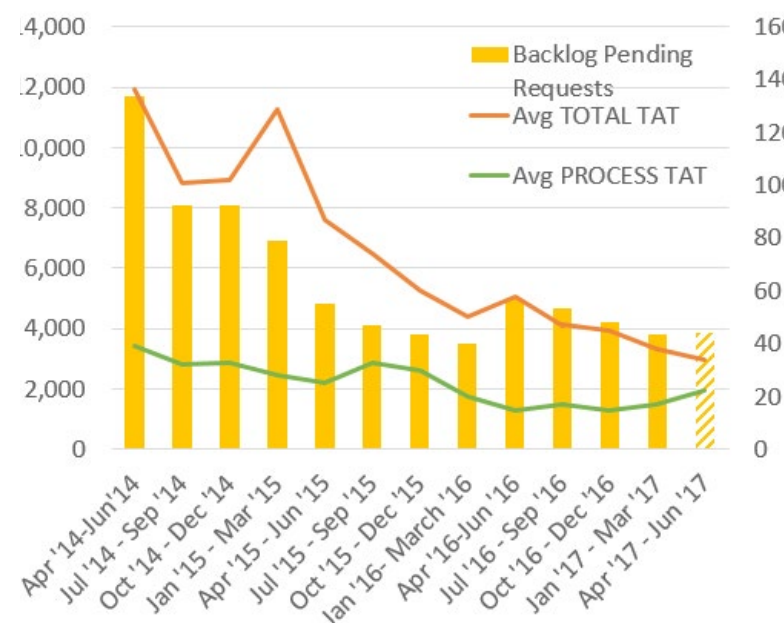
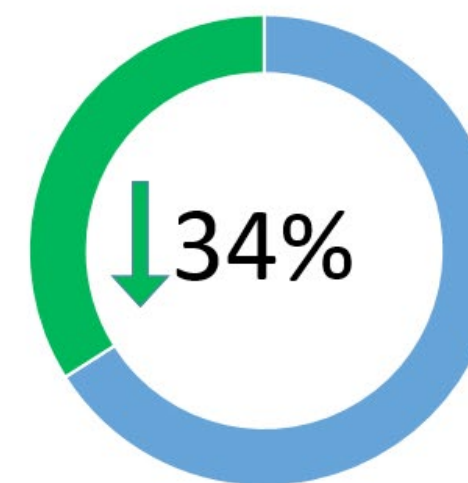
Total Average Turnaround Time



Requests Received



Total Average Process Time



In the month of April, the Houston Forensic Science Center continued a longstanding trend of decreasing turnaround times despite an ongoing increase in requests for our services. Turnaround time in April dropped 34 percent compared to the same month last year, while requests received increased by 37 percent compared to April 2016. Overall, since taking over management of the Houston Police Department's forensic services in April 2014, backlogged requests have dropped from 12,000 to fewer than 4,000 at the end of April 2017. Overall average turnaround time has also dropped from more than 140 days to 34 days on HFSC's three-year anniversary.

In next month's newsletter, these graphics will change as we try to present the information in a new way that may be more applicable to our current work.

Total average TAT include all sections averaged from the start of the last 12 months measuring the turn around time from the request by the agency to report. This is compared to the same preceding 12 month period. In the last 12 months TAT was 34 days on average and 67 days in the preceding 12 months. Requests received is the total of all requests received in the 12 month period. This was 37,000 in the last 12 months and 26,901 in the preceding 12 months. Total average process time approximates the time from when the laboratory starts processing to reporting. Average process time was 15 days in the last 12 months and 23 days in the preceding 12 months.



# HFSC GRANTS

## THE VISION FOR GRANTS

### HFSC Launches

## NEW eDISCOVERY

HFSC has launched a new, more user friendly public website that houses lab documents, including standard operating procedures and corrective action forms and findings.

This version of the “eDiscovery” platform will be searchable, allowing users to more easily find the documents they are seeking.

The website allows lawyers, including defense attorneys, to easily access documents they once had to get a court order to receive. It is part of HFSC’s attempt to be more transparent and balanced.

The first version of eDiscovery launched about a year ago. But while all the documents have been available, the website did not have a search function, forcing users to look for documents by discipline. The new website will allow for a search using key words, search terms and filters .

Like the old site, the new one also does not include case-specific information. Documents related to active criminal investigations or otherwise legally privileged will also not be posted to the public website.

Attorneys needing such records should contact HFSC’s Client Services/Case Management Division at [triage@houstonforensicscience.org](mailto:triage@houstonforensicscience.org). Members of the public can request case-specific documentation by submitting a public information request at [pia@houstonforensicscience.org](mailto:pia@houstonforensicscience.org).



The Houston Forensic Science Center applied this year for eight grants totaling nearly \$3 million, part of an effort to expand a program that can help fund the research needed to improve our services.

As a local government corporation, HFSC is in a unique position to be both a prime and sub-recipient on grants, and provide universities and other institutions with the on-the-ground experimentation they often need to complement their research.

If approved, these grant dollars will allow HFSC to delve into novel programs, including researching how to best use a science-based evidence selection to solve cold cases and introducing a new, high-tech software that will allow firearms examiners to better link between guns used at different crime scenes.

The programs and research funded by the grants will advance the science done at HFSC, improving the justice system as a whole.

For example, HFSC applied for a \$572,000 grant in collaboration with a group of statisticians and researchers that will allow us to introduce more challenging “test” cases in our blind quality program in the toxicology, DNA and latent print disciplines. By working with

statisticians, HFSC will also be able to use the results from the blind testing program to establish an error rate.

HFSC is teaming up with the Houston Police Department, the Harris County District Attorney’s Office and others on a \$56,000 grant that will allow us to review data from our rape kit elimination project to help jurisdictions nationwide establish more efficient processes for analyzing sexual assault kits.

An enhancement grant program provides an opportunity for HFSC to construct new space for its Crime Scene Unit, toxicology and DNA sections, three areas that can’t make many long-term improvements due to space and power limitations. If awarded, the \$717,000 grant will help HFSC implement changes that will increase efficiencies in all three sections.

HFSC is always seeking to become more efficient while trying to reduce cognitive bias. Research has shown that bias can at times color the findings of a forensic analyst, and HFSC is attempting to remove such issues to help ensure the results we provide the justice system represent objective science.

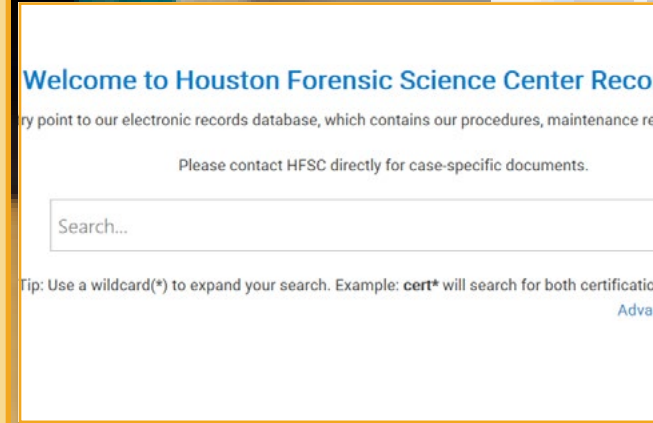
An \$867,000 grant would further those goals by allowing HFSC to hire three additional forensic analysts in the DNA section as well as three case management specialists.

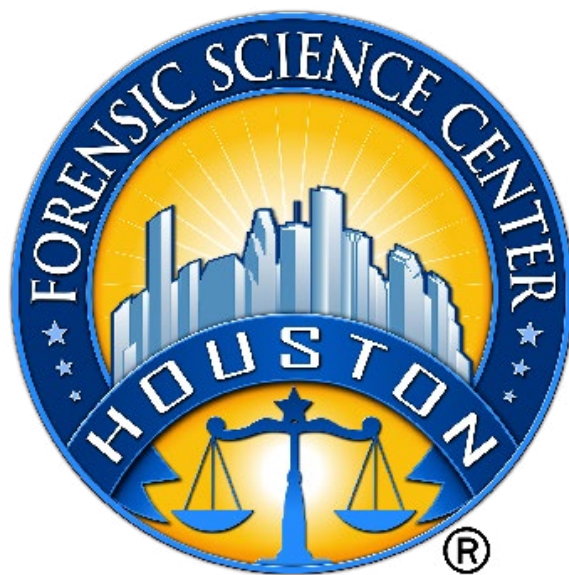
By adding three case

management specialists to the Forensic Biology Section, HFSC will have the ability to mask potentially biasing information needed to determine eligibility for upload into the national DNA database, or CODIS. This will reduce cognitive bias among bench analysts.

In addition, this grant will allow HFSC to temporarily hire a Lean Six Sigma (LSS) Master Black Belt Engineer to train three staff members to achieve LSS Black Belt certification and further improve our processes within Forensic Biology. Lean Six Sigma is a method used primarily in industry to increase efficiency and quality. Forensic laboratories, including HFSC, have been adopting these methods to increase efficiencies in scientific processes. Training staff to have Black Belt capabilities will allow HFSC to continually increase efficiency and improve our processes as demands and technologies change.

It remains unclear which grants and proposals will be approved, however, HFSC is committed to expanding its grant program in the future. Grant dollars that fund research and development projects leverage and amplify the work we do, helping take it to the next level. As we move forward with these and other projects, we will be sure to update the community with our findings and progress.





### **CONTACT US**

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### **LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES, ATTORNEYS AND COURTS**

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Fax: (832) 598-7178

[info@houstonforensicscience.org](mailto:info@houstonforensicscience.org)

[legal@houstonforensicscience.org](mailto:legal@houstonforensicscience.org)

### **JOB SEEKERS**

Fax: (888) 396-7190

[hr@houstonforensicscience.org](mailto:hr@houstonforensicscience.org)

Houston Forensic Science Center, Attention: HR Recruiter, 1301 Fannin St., Suite 170, Houston, TX 77002

### **MEDIA RELATIONS**

Media resources are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

[media@houstonforensicscience.org](mailto:media@houstonforensicscience.org) (Media requests)

[pia@houstonforensicscience.org](mailto:pia@houstonforensicscience.org) (Public Information Act requests)

(713) 929-6768 (Office)

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