Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner and prominent attorney, Michael Bromwich, a former inspector general of the U.S. Department of Justice, joined the Houston Forensic Science Center in a celebration of its five-year anniversary.

Mayor Turner and Mr. Bromwich praised HFSC for the progress it has made in the five years since it took over management of what had previously been the Houston Police Department’s crime lab, crime scene unit and parts of its identification division.

Texas Rep. Gina Calanni, HPD assistant executive chief Matt Slinkard, members of HFSC’s board of directors and other notables also joined the staff on the momentous occasion.

“Five years is both a short time and an eternity when we reflect on the progress that has been made, the challenges we have faced and how much is still left to do,” said Dr. Peter Stout, CEO and president.

“Having both Mayor Turner and Mr. Bromwich join us for this celebration was evidence that we have turned a corner,” Dr. Stout added.

The City of Houston created HFSC as a local government corporation overseen by a nine-member board of directors after years of scandals plagued HPD’s crime lab and other forensic services. It was in part Mr. Bromwich’s audit of the crime lab, which uncovered many of the issues, that paved the way for the city’s bold move.

When HFSC took over in April 2014, it inherited 12,000 backlogged requests and a turnaround time that averaged more than 150 days.

In five years, the overall backlog stands at about 4,000 requests and the average turnaround time across disciplines is between 35 and 40 days.

“That is not where we want to be _ HFSC’s goal is an average turnaround time of 30 days across disciplines and no backlogs _ but it is progress,” Dr. Stout said.

“HFSC will spend the coming years further chipping away at these backlogs and ensuring that we achieve our goal of providing stakeholders with the right answer at the right time.”
A Few Words From Our
PRESIDENT

HOUSTON FORENSIC SCIENCE CENTER

Peter Stout, PH.D.
CEO/President

Dr. Peter Stout, HFSC’s CEO and
president, initially joined the agency
in 2015 as its chief operating officer
and vice president. He has more than
15 years of experience in forensic
science and forensic toxicology.
Prior to joining HFSC, Dr. Stout
worked as a senior research forensic
scientist and director of operations
in the Center for Forensic Sciences at
RTI International. Dr. Stout also has
served as president of the Society
of Forensic Toxicologists (SOFT). He
represented SOFT in the Consortium
of Forensic Science Organizations
and has participated in national
policy debates on the future of
forensic sciences in the United
States. Dr. Stout has a doctorate in
toxicology from the University of
Colorado Health Sciences Center
in Denver. Dr. Stout also served as
an officer in the U.S. Navy Medical
Service Corps.

Five years.
A blip in time and an eternity.
We could, if we wanted, rest on our heels and say: done.
We’ve achieved independence. Backlogs have been cut by two-
thirds. Turnaround times are way below the 60 days most other
crime labs in the country aim for. We are 100 percent civilian and
we’ve implemented efficiencies across disciplines.
But I think if we did that we would be cheating the
community, the city and ourselves.

There is so much more we can and must do to truly fulfill
the mission of providing stakeholders with quality forensics in a
timely manner.
We understand more and more each day how this concept
actually differs between disciplines, and as we improve our
communication and collaboration with all stakeholders to ensure
our work properly serves the justice system in its entirety we
realize we still have a long way to go to achieve our goals.

For example, while a 30-day turnaround time might work
for DNA analysis in some property crimes that might be too
long for work being done by the audio/video unit which is often
needed within hours.

One of our many goals as we look toward the next five
years is to ensure we better meet these many different needs while
ensuring the highest quality science.
So while celebrating our successes is important and
motivating, we must use it as motivation to do more and even
better.
If we’ve gotten this far in only five years, think how much
more can be accomplished in 10.

Peter Stout, PH.D.
CEO/President

The Houston Forensic Science Center is in the midst of a complex move and it is _ and will _ impact
production.

Turnaround times have increased slightly both due to the complexities of the move, but also because some
sections, such as forensic biology/DNA, are eliminating older backlogs.

As they complete the oldest cases, it appears as though turnaround times are increasing. So in some instances,
a rising turnaround time is an indication of a positive overall trend.

The move, however, will have the biggest impact on production in the weeks and months ahead.

Last month, the latent print and digital multimedia sections completed their move to HFSC’s new facility at
500 Jefferson St. in downtown Houston. By the end of May, 60 percent of HFSC staff _ including the crime scene unit
and parts of the forensic biology/DNA section _ will all be housed at Jefferson.

The labs should be ready to go in October and will be moving during the last month of the year when it is
expected to have the biggest impact on production.

For more information, please visit www.houstonforensicscience.org
The Houston Forensic Science Center is preparing for two significant moves in May—which will include the crime scene unit and part of the forensic biology/DNA section—while also progressing plans to construct a laboratory at its new downtown location.

Once the May moves are complete more than 60 percent of HFSC’s staff will be located at 500 Jefferson, the downtown high-rise where HFSC has a 30-year lease to house its staff, laboratory, shooting range and evidence process area.

By year’s end, all staff will have moved out of HPD headquarters and into the new facility.

HFSC’s latent print and multimedia sections moved earlier this year, along with a few administrative functions. As part of those moves, HFSC vacated a leased location in downtown Houston that had served as its corporate headquarters.

The corporate address is now 500 Jefferson, 13th floor, Houston, Texas 77002. The main number is 713-929-6760. HFSC’s COO, crime scene unit, part of the biology/DNA section, research and development, part of the client services/case management team and additional administrative staff are moving in May.

HPD will be able to move into some of the space HFSC vacates in early May, a big help to them since they still are struggling after losing some of their areas to Hurricane Harvey.

Once the May moves are complete, HFSC will be fully focused on constructing its new lab space. The city has approved the necessary permits. The HFSC Board of Directors also approved at its April meeting the purchase of lab furniture.

This move is crucial to HFSC’s success, but also complex. As laboratory spaces and staff move, turnaround times will temporarily increase. HFSC will provide additional information as the plan progresses.

Facility

By Jordan Benton

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Digital multimedia

HFSC IS FULLY CIVILIAN

By Jordan Benton

The Houston Forensic Science Center’s digital and multimedia section is the last discipline to be fully civilianized when the last officers were reassigned in February to the Houston Police Department.

HFSC now has no HPD officers under its management. The final transfers that took place in February completed a transition that began in April 2014 when the local government corporation created by the City of Houston took over management of what had been HPD’s crime lab, crime scene unit and parts of its identification division.

“While these officers did commendable work and helped the section achieve accreditation, it is ultimately in the community’s best interest for officers to fulfill law enforcement duties and trained scientists do independent forensic investigations,” said Dr. Peter Stout, HFSC’s CEO and president.

HFSC had more than 60 officers under its management responsibility when it took over management of Houston’s forensic disciplines. Most of the HPD officers had been assigned to the digital forensic and crime scene units.

It took longest for the digital unit to civilianize in part due to the difficulties associated with finding qualified analysts to fulfill these duties.

“The market for these folks is competitive, especially since the private sector offers higher-paying, less-stressful opportunities,” Dr. Stout said.

“But HFSC is now in a better position to attract analysts dedicated to working in the public sector.”

The digital unit, which recently moved to HFSC’s new downtown facility, is recruiting for some of the empty positions. But it has also used this opportunity along with the departure of the section’s manager to restructure the leadership and cross-train the staff.

Previously, staff in the digital unit specialized in either audio/video analysis or digital multimedia work, which includes analysis of cellphones, laptops and tablets.

Requests for digital work are increasing exponentially and the group, like the crime scene unit, is on call 24/7 and responds to crime scenes when necessary. Jerry Pena oversees both units, improving communication with stakeholders.

Two analysts have been fully trained to complete audio/video and digital work and others will undergo a similar training program in the coming months. HFSC has also hired to fill at least one of the vacancies.

“By cross-training staff the section will be more flexible to respond to stakeholder needs,” Pena said. “The goal is always to do quality forensic work in a timely manner, and we believe this restructuring will help HFSC achieve this objective.”

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Sexual Assault

HOUSTON AHEAD WITH SURVIVORS

The City of Houston and key Harris County agencies announced in April several new initiatives designed to improve sexual assault investigations, including the launch in May of a pilot program that will track all rape kits from the moment of collection through prosecution.

The Houston Forensic Science Center, Mayor Sylvester Turner, Harris County District Attorney Kim Ogg, HPD Chief Art Acevedo and victim advocates also announced at the news conference the re-establishment of a stakeholder task force and the receipt of a grant that will help several remote West Texas counties with sexual assault kit analysis.

HFSC, along with Harris Health System, the region’s largest public hospital, HPD and the DA’s office will begin tracking all rape kits in May.

These Houston entities chose to participate in the pilot program overseen by the Department of Public Safety’s crime lab that will help identify problems, bottlenecks and kinks before the tracking program rolls out statewide.

“It is crucial for a large crime lab such as Houston’s to lead the way with such initiatives both because we set an example for others and because if problems arise, they can often be more easily identified in a large system,” said Dr. Amy Castillo, HFSC’s COO and vice president.

DPS selected the web-based program, STACS TrackIt, as the software for Texas’ program after Rep. Donna Howard sponsored and got passed legislation requiring all rape kits in the state be tracked from the moment of collection and through prosecution. The law also requires the system to provide the sexual assault survivors a view of their evidence so they can identify where it is in the process.

“This is where the future is, in leveraging capacity and resources.”

The program will be rolled out statewide in September.

The tracking program’s rollout provided an opportunity for HFSC to re-establish a stakeholder task force that had originally been put in place to eliminate Houston’s longstanding backlog of more than 6,600 rape kits. The task force participated in federally funded research in the cause of the backlog and made recommendations on how to prevent a similar problem in the future.

The task force evolved into an important place for stakeholders to collaborate, raise concerns and discuss solutions for an array of issues. The task force stopped meeting after the grant ended and the federal funding disappeared.

“Since we already needed to work together on tracking, and we had talked about re-establishing the group so many times previously, it seemed like the perfect opportunity to move forward with the idea,” Dr. Castillo said.

Finally, HFSC has been awarded a state grant that will allow it to process 60 rape kits from 19 rural West Texas counties. Until now, those kits went to DPS and the jurisdictions waited months, if not years, for an answer. In addition, law enforcement agencies struggled collecting the kits from the hospitals and delivering them to the crime lab due to the distances associated with the task. The grant allows the hospitals to ship the kits directly to HFSC. HFSC will have a turnaround time of 60 days on these kits as it is now so close to eliminating its backlog.

“This is where the future is, in leveraging capacity and resources on a larger scale to help the entire state and ultimately the justice system,” said Dr. Peter Stout, HFSC’s CEO and president.

“Considering how intimately we all rely on each other to make sure the national databases are as broad and effective as possible, the smartest thing we can all do is help get overall, statewide turnaround times as low as possible.”

LATENT PRINTS EXPANDS BLIND PROGRAM

By Jordan Benton

The Houston Forensic Science Center has expanded its blind quality control program to include verifications in the latent print section as another measure to combat potential biases in the process.

At HFSC, each time a full latent print comparison is conducted and a conclusion is reached, a second examiner performs another independent, full comparison to verify or refute the original examiner’s conclusion. However, the verifier is aware of the first examiner’s conclusion.

With a blind case, the review process is the same, however, the second examiner is unaware of the initial findings.

“We’re trying to see if we can identify bias in the current process,” Rebecca Green, HFSC’s latent print technical lead, said. “HFSC may be able to use the findings to identify and minimize bias, but it will take time to build enough data to track trends,” she added.

Blind quality controls can help HFSC’s latent print section establish a baseline for future research.

The goal is for the section to complete one blind verification each month.

Blind verification is more time consuming since the second review is as resource intensive as the first one.

The blind verification process is also new to HFSC so it may need to be tweaked as feedback is gathered and lessons are learned. The section will also increase the number of blind verifications after it eliminates a long-standing backlog.

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