The Houston Forensic Science Center has been operating on a rotating schedule since March 23, decreasing onsite presence by about 50 percent and allowing more work to be done at home.

HFSC imposed an alternate schedule to remain operational while also protecting staff and meeting social distancing guidelines. The inevitable result, however, is a significant slowdown in output in some disciplines, leading to larger backlogs in the longterm, especially since requests for analysis have not decreased overall despite stringent restrictions on movement.

Some disciplines are experiencing a 50 percent drop in production. But others have maintained the same output because they are better able to work remotely.

“Digging out of the hole created by this pandemic could take months, if not years,” said Dr. Peter Stout, HFSC’s CEO and president. “The alternatives, however, would have been worse. To remain fully operational we would have had to endanger our staff, which was not even a consideration. And to shutdown entirely would leave a forensic vacuum in the nation’s fourth largest city. The ripples of that would have been felt throughout the justice system for much longer,” he added.

Initially, as HFSC made plans to respond to the growing crisis there was a sense that requests for service might drop as more people were confined to their homes.

In fact, the reality is quite different.

For most disciplines, requests have remained nearly identical to last year and in some areas, such as DNA, there has been an increase.

One of the most significant decreases has been in seized drugs, a trend seen nationwide, and that has simply allowed the group to keep up with what is coming through the door and avoid significant backlogs.

Latent prints has also seen requests drop, so the section is chipping away at a longstanding backlog.

The dataset, however, is small and may not be indicative of what will happen if the stay-at-home order remains in effect for longer than expected.

At first, for example, it appeared the crime scene unit’s call outs had dropped. A deeper dive into the statistics, however, showed that in fact violent crime in Houston has increased and CSU is busier than ever before.

“At this time, all we can say is that the data shows HFSC is in fact an essential service,” Dr. Stout said. “What will this look like over time and how long will it take to recover? Those are questions we may not be able to answer for several years.”
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.

I often talk about the right answer at the right time and it probably sounds a bit trite and cliché by now. But this phrase—borne from my attempt to explain to people advocating for perfect results that slow results cause damage just like wrong answers do—has added importance during this pandemic.

Over time, “the right answer at the right time” has become shorthand for a much more nuanced philosophy that really the best forensic results provide a stakeholder with a usable result when they most need it while also not jeopardizing the potential future use of that evidence and conclusion.

This is the beauty and the challenge of the “preliminary” result. Things like a preliminary AFIS ASSOCIATION more quickly provide useful information early on in an investigation but do not carry the same weight as an “identification.” The challenge is ensuring all users understand its limitations responsible use.

Every discipline has some analog of this: a version of a “rapid” result that provides a faster answer but also increases the risk of it being carelessly used. This has never been easy, and this global pandemic that has fundamentally upended all aspects of life doesn’t help. With the dizzying distraction of existential anxiety and the search for toilet paper, it is seductive to want to suspend or weaken the “rules” and leap to rapid. And as difficult as this has always been in forensics, we are watching it play out on a grand, life-and-death scale with clinical testing as the world rushes to identify COVID-19 patients and find a vaccine. I find this global struggle around how to test billions of people for antibodies and virus to be further affirmation that HFSC is asking good questions about the balance between the right answer and the right time.

Just as with the virus testing, for us, wrong means lives and late means lives.

We cannot always wait for a perfect result. The truly effective result is the one that is sufficient for a point in time, has understood and respected limitations and doesn’t compromise future needs. That doesn’t change during this pandemic.

Early data suggests requests for forensic analysis have not decreased overall, and in some disciplines is increasing. Turns out, people are still people after all and still commit crimes. The mixture of requests will change, but the social fabric of law, order and justice has to be maintained if there is any chance of civilization surviving. The right answer at the right time still is the same as it always was. It is one point of the “same” in a world where it seems like nothing is the same anymore. The world still depends on accuracy perhaps even more so when everything else is in question.

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The Houston Forensic Science Center operated on a rotating schedule for only one week in March. As a result, the overall average turnaround time increased by only eight days compared to February.

That number will likely double in April as the data reflects a full month of decreased operations.

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That number will likely double in April as the data reflects a full month of decreased operations. Under the new schedule, HFSC has divided each discipline into two teams with each team working one week in the lab and one week from home. Due to this, HFSC has decreased onsite presence by about 50 percent, allowing for physical distancing guidelines to be met and decreasing the chance for broad infection within a discipline.

This also, however, decreased output by nearly 50 percent.

The pandemic occurred while many HFSC sections were still recovering from a lab shutdown during a recent facility move. As a result, many still had backlogs that had built up during the move and the current decreased capacity will make it more difficult to dig out.

For more information, please visit www.houstonforensicscience.org
The Houston Forensic Science Center is preparing to hold its May board meeting virtually assuming current social distancing guidelines remain in effect and prevent directors from convening as they normally would at the City Hall Annex.

The monthly board meeting is a place to share important updates about HFSC operations and allow for key contract approvals to occur so operations can continue. The current pandemic, which limits crowd size, has made it difficult, and possibly unsafe, for the board to meet in person.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott suspended on March 16 provisions of the Texas Open Meetings Act that made it difficult for a public board or government council, commission or other oversight entity to hold teleconference meetings. This suspension will make it possible for the HFSC board to meet using Microsoft Teams, which will also allow for public access starting at 9 a.m. on May 8. The agenda and the meeting link will be posted to the HFSC website on Tuesday May 5.

"Right now, we are focused on ensuring HFSC business is openly discussed, while also protecting the health and safety of our board members, staff presenters and the public. We are not alone in navigating the unique challenges presented by COVID-19 as it relates to public gatherings, including board meetings," said Akilah Mance, HFSC’s general counsel.

With the uncertainty surrounding the upcoming weeks - even months - the lab is monitoring the situation as it unfolds and developing a longer-term plan to deal with the possibility that it will be some time before strict social distancing guidelines are lifted or that a second wave of the virus will strike in a few months.

The quality division has created additional policies and procedures to better track and monitor remote work as the Houston Forensic Science Center responds to the COVID-19 pandemic by transitioning to allow some work to be performed offsite.

The goal is to add an extra layer of transparency and accountability to the workflow to ensure not only the quality of the work is maintained but also that all are aware of how and where it was conducted. The policies specifically address both the removal of documents and the remote completion of some work.

“We have an obligation to protect our staff and maintain social distancing guidelines while remaining operational,” said Dr. Peter Stout, HFSC’s CEO and president.

“But our obligation to quality work and a transparent operation is as important. The goal is to balance these obligations in an unprecedented situation that is requiring us to conduct work in ways and places that we never did before.”

To address the transportation of case files, the quality division created a method to track their movement using HFSC’s Laboratory Information Management System’s chain of custody.

A standalone chain of custody form has been created to document the transfer of other records, such as validation binders, training records, maintenance logs, etc. This document is being maintained in HFSC’s document compliance software system, Qualtrax.

Staff must also receive approval from either a member of section management, executive management or the quality division before removing any documents from HFSC’s facility. But these new tracking mechanisms do provide staff greater flexibility, essentially allowing them to check a record out for a duration of time to allow for offsite work.

In addition, the quality division has issued a memo that delineates how some aspects of case work, such as report writing or reviews, can be conducted offsite and how to document it in the case record.

Any element of case work being performed remotely must be indicated within the case record and include: the date of the work, the name of the staff member that completed the work, a description of the work completed remotely and an indication that the work has been performed “offsite.”

This documentation in the case record will provide transparency into what portions of analysis, interpretation or review were performed remotely and what was completed onsite.

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With the uncertainty surrounding the upcoming weeks - even months - the lab is monitoring the situation as it unfolds and developing a longer-term plan to deal with the possibility that it will be some time before strict social distancing guidelines are lifted or that a second wave of the virus will strike in a few months.
The Houston Forensic Science Center’s crime scene investigators are wearing more and different personal protective equipment (PPE) at scenes to help protect against infection and spread of COVID-19.

The 27-member crime scene unit operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week responding to violent crimes across the 685-square-mile city. Due to its small size and increased exposure at crime scenes, this unit is the most vulnerable to infection and the impacts of an outbreak within the group could significantly hinder its operations.

At the moment, the crime scene unit has only minimized hospital calls to urgent requests and is responding routinely to all other service calls.

“Our CSU does not have the option to work from home. They have to be out in the world while almost everyone else can stay safe at home,” said Dr. Peter Stout, HFSC’s CEO and president.

“Right now, we have to focus on keeping them as protected as possible while also serving the City of Houston.”

To afford better protection at scenes, crime scene investigators are now wearing goggles in addition to the mask, gloves and booties they have always donned.

In addition, CSIs have switched from regular surgical masks to higher-grade N-95 masks to protect from particles and microbial exposure. HFSC fit tests staff using N-95, N-100 or other respirators.

Until now, most of the PPE CSIs have worn at scenes were designed to protect the evidence from contamination, especially DNA. Now, however, there is an increased need to protect staff from the evidence.

Each CSU shift is also disinfecting vehicles and equipment to ensure any potential infectious agents are removed from items being touched and handled by multiple people.

In the office, the group is maintaining social distance requirements as are members of other HFSC sections.

CSIs are also checking their temperatures before reporting to a shift.

“It’s important that our staff are responsible and take precautions that are implemented to minimize their exposure and possibility of infection. Especially if it means bringing it home to their loved ones,” said Jerry Pena, director of CSU and multimedia.

“Anyone who contracts the virus will have an impact on our operation. It would take only one to two CSIs becoming infected to force us to implement an alternative plan.”

CSU does have a contingency plan in place in the event of an outbreak within the group and is in constant communication with the Houston Police Department to ensure priorities are understood, Mr. Pena said.

“CSIs are resilient. At first things come as a shock, but we fall into routine. We roll with the punches and get back to business,” Mr. Pena said.
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