



HFSC's Board of Directors Discusses Plan to Eliminate Rape Kit Backlog

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The Houston Forensic Science Center's Board of Directors discussed at an informational session Friday that the corporation's commitment to eliminate its rape kit backlog by July 1 has forced the Forensic Biology Section to nearly triple production. Board members emphasized the importance of providing timely DNA analysis on rape kits to law enforcement both to assist in their investigation and to ensure victims get justice.

"This board cares deeply about the timeliness of sexual assault kit testing, which is why we took steps last fall to address this," Board chairwoman Nicole Casarez said. "But this board is also concerned about the quality of the work ... we don't want to sacrifice quality for speed."

Mayor Sylvester Turner announced on April 6 that HFSC would eliminate the backlog by July 1. At that time, HFSC had about 330 untested rape kits. More than 45 requests had not been made automatically. In addition, since April new requests have been received at a rate of about 100 per month. HFSC continues completing work on other samples that had been in process when this project began. HFSC's plan is to reach and sustain a 30-day turnaround time by July.

To complete this task, HFSC has nearly tripled production in its DNA laboratory. The board emphasized the quality of work must be maintained, and noted that increased production also raises the risk for contamination and other mistakes.

In an effort to prevent such events, HFSC has embedded two members of its Quality Division in the laboratory to closely monitor the project and to ensure quality does not become a victim of quantity.

Following is information regarding HFSC's progress through May 12:

- HFSC's sexual assault section has issued about 217 reports.
- 100 rape kits have been outsourced.
- Since April 6, HFSC has received about 166 new sexual assault requests.
- HFSC has installed four new instruments to increase production.
- HFSC has lifted overtime caps for most of the Forensic Biology Section. The staff is working overtime during the week as well as on weekends.
- DNA extractions have been occurring five to six times a week rather than three as had been the norm.
- Four new analysts, a scientific technical leader and a manager will join the staff by June.

"We don't try to hide things," Casarez said, noting one of the Center's missions is to be transparent and to share all backlog information at public meetings.

HFSC is a local government corporation that provides forensic services to the City of Houston and other local agencies. HFSC is overseen by a Board of Directors appointed by the Mayor of Houston and confirmed by the Houston City Council. Its management structure is designed to be responsive to a 2009 recommendation by the National Academy of Sciences that called for crime laboratories to be independent of law enforcement and prosecutorial branches of government.

HFSC currently operates in eight forensic disciplines.

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