



# Houston Forensic Science Center, Inc.

Board of Directors

Virtual Meeting

~ Minutes ~

Friday, August 13, 2021

www.houstonforensicscience.org

1. **CALL TO ORDER:**

At 9 a.m., Board Chairwoman Stacey Mitchell called the meeting to order.

The Houston Forensic Science Center, Inc. (“HFSC” and/or the “corporation”) board of directors (the “board”) convened this meeting on Friday, August 13, 2021. In a manner permitted by the corporation’s bylaws, the meeting was called by providing all directors with notice of the date, time (instructions for Microsoft Teams access and call-in options) and purposes of the meeting at least three days before the date of the meeting.

Due to health and safety concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the meeting was conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams, a web-conferencing platform. The board members participated by videoconference in accordance with Chapter 551, Texas Government Code and Governor Greg Abbott’s March 16, 2020 temporary suspension of certain provisions of the Texas Open Meetings Act. Notice of this meeting was posted online to the [website](#) on August 10 along with a free-of-charge videoconference link, dial-in phone number and an electronic copy of the agenda packet, as required.

2. **ROLL CALL:**

The following board members were present via teleconference:

Chairwoman Stacey Mitchell
Vice Chairwoman Mary Lentschke
Philip Hilder
Vanessa Goodwin
Ellen Cohen
Lois Moore
Vicki Huff
Tracy Calabrese

The following board member was absent:

Anna Vasquez
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The following board member arrived late:

Francisco Medina
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Chairwoman Mitchell announced a quorum was present.

\*Director Medina joined the meeting at 9:01 a.m.

\*Directors Goodwin and Huff left the meeting at 11:10 a.m. and 11:30 a.m., respectively.

3. **PUBLIC COMMENT:**

Chairwoman Mitchell gave members of the public an opportunity to address the board. No members of the public addressed the board.

4. **REVIEW AND APPROVAL OF MINUTES FROM PRIOR MEETING:**

Following a motion by Director Ellen Cohen and seconded by Director Philip Hilder, the board unanimously approved the July 9, 2021 meeting minutes.

5. **CHAIRWOMAN MITCHELL'S REPORT:**

The chairwoman noted the option to hold a fully virtual meeting due to the global pandemic will officially end in September. The board will hold a hybrid meeting in September with a quorum of at least five members present in person, including herself, the presiding officer.

6. **DISCUSSION REGARDING THE CITY OF HOUSTON OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL REPORT ON THE CRIME SCENE UNIT (CSU):**

Chairwoman Mitchell first acknowledged the board reviewed the final report and recommendations that resulted from an investigation conducted by the City of Houston Office of Inspector General (OIG) into allegations regarding a hostile work environment and mismanagement in HFSC's crime scene unit. The board referred the complaint to the OIG in January after receiving an anonymous letter detailing the complaint. She stated the board took the complaint seriously and would not accept poor behavior. Before any discussion was held regarding the board's plans to address the report's recommendations, she opened the floor for Dr. Peter Stout, president & CEO and Ms. Carina Haynes, CSU director, to present an update about the current state of CSU and its accomplishments thus far.

6a. **PRESIDENT AND CEO DR. PETER STOUT AND CSU DIRECTOR CARINA HAYNES' REPORT ON CSU:**

Dr. Stout first mentioned the positive progress the group has made despite its demanding workload. He noted the group responded to 138 service calls in July – pointing out 71 calls for vehicles and six officer-involved shootings.

One of the downsides of an influx in call volume is the mental challenges it poses to the staff. Currently, crime scene investigators (CSI) rotate every three months through all three work shifts – day, evening and night. Ms. Haynes discussed a scheduling survey she administered to the CSIs for a potential work schedule change beginning in January 2022. The survey sought input from the CSIs into what they want their 2022 work schedule to look like. Twenty-nine out of 38 CSIs requested to move to one shift per year in order to have a better work-life balance. The request was approved and the open bid period will determine their future work schedule. Ms. Haynes also noted the possibility for CSIs to swap shifts, an option that was previously unavailable. She then mentioned four supervisors had been switched on July 24 from salary employees to hourly entitling them to overtime pay. In addition, their schedules moved August 21 to a Monday through Thursday and Thursday through Sunday rotation to mirror the CSIs' schedule. This change allows for true time off and on-call compensation. Next, she discussed CSU's staffing portfolio, noting two candidates, both with prior experience, have been selected to attend the National Forensic Academy's 10-week training program in September.

Next, the chairwoman expressed the board's support of HFSC's leadership and its work to continue developing and implementing necessary changes. She also thanked Ms. Haynes and the CSU team for their dedicated commitment and work. Chairwoman Mitchell then announced the creation of a board working group to partner with HFSC's senior leadership to perform an in-depth review of the OIG report and recommendations and implement strategies to address the recommendations. Dr. Amy Castillo, vice-president and COO, will lead the working group, which includes Vice Chair Mary Lentschke and directors Vicki Huff and Vanessa Goodwin. The group's progress will be reported to the board every two months during regular board meetings. She then opened the floor for further discussion. At that time no additional comments were made.

7. **PRESIDENT AND CEO DR. PETER STOUT'S REPORT:**

Dr. Stout first pointed out the toxicology section eliminated its alcohol backlog in July.

He then explained HFSC's staffing portfolio, noting the agency now has 209 employees and four vacancies. He shared recent outreach efforts, noting his presentation to a forensic science task force in Michigan.

Next, Dr. Stout discussed a 14% increase in overall requests from January 1 until July 31. Those requests were largely driven by CSU, the National Integrated Ballistic Information Network (NIBIN) processing team and DNA. He said firearm examination requests also increased 50% in June and July largely due to cases moving through the court system. The Harris County court system is struggling with a backlog of some 153,000 cases.

Dr. Stout touched on challenges with casework surges and said HFSC's employees worked 3,600 in overtime hours within the last 12 months. And, he mentioned the complexity in seized drugs cases – particularly noting fake pharmaceuticals pills, the fentanyl escalation. One solution is to purchase better technology for the section to keep up with the growing and more complex demands.

8. **VICE PRESIDENT AND COO DR. AMY CASTILLO'S REPORT:**

Dr. Castillo stated many HFSC sections are struggling with significant backlogs. She noted the firearms section's examination backlog has increased to 71. However, the group implemented "Operation Pew Pew" to help assign cases more efficiently and to achieve weekly goals.

In the past month, the toxicology section began new in-house drug confirmation testing.

The latent prints section started the pilot for its lean six sigma project on August 1, a project to help improve the processes and to address the long-standing backlog. Dr. Castillo said the next phase will focus on latent print processing.

Next, she explained the long-term plans for where staff will work, noting most of the analytical sections are on-site fulltime. DNA analysts, toxicology and latent print examiners have hybrid work schedules, working both remotely and onsite. HFSC has a work from home policy in place that clearly defines the expectations and responsibilities for employees who work remotely.

Dr. Castillo shared that five DNA analysts have completed training and will begin independent casework.

9. **TREASURER AND CFO DAVID LEACH'S PRESENTATION REGARDING FISCAL YEAR 2021 BUDGET REALLOCATIONS:**

Mr. Leach first noted that the fiscal year 2021 final budget reallocation did not impact the total budget amount. He then shared that HFSC had spent most of its budget on personnel, noting he moved around several line items to avoid overspending in any one specific area. Mr. Leach explained that all expenditures fell within the approved budget.

Next, Director Lois Moore asked if HFSC needed to ask for money for additional staff positions to address increasing requests and backlogs?

Mr. Leach stated HFSC received \$1.7 million in grant revenue and about \$1.4 million in COVID relief dollars, but those additional funds are not adequate to keep up with the current workload. Dr. Stout also added that the City of Houston has given HFSC an additional \$1.3 million in the

upcoming budget, which amounts to a 3% increase, not nearly enough to keep up with the 14% increase in requests. To keep up with the increase he estimated the city would need to increase HFSC's budget by about 10%.

Director Moore made a motion to approve the fiscal year 2021 budget reallocations. Director Francisco Medina seconded the motion, and the board unanimously approved the reallocations in a roll call vote.

10. **TREASURER AND CFO DAVID LEACH'S REPORT:**

Mr. Leach gave an overall look into HFSC's spending. Labor costs account for 68% of its total business spending, 23% in services and 4% in supplies and capital. He also added that most supply costs are for forensic biology/DNA.

11. **QUALITY DIRECTOR ERIKA ZIEMAK'S REPORT:**

Ms. Ziemak said the quality division met its June and July submission targets for blind quality control samples and verifications.

She announced that HFSC's accrediting body, ANAB, had approved the scope expansion for toxicology, allowing the section to resume drug confirmation testing. During its annual assessment, ANAB found one non-conformance relating to training documentation. HFSC has addressed and fixed the issue and ANAB has since approved the remediation. She noted the quality section revised all the disciplines' training manuals to ensure full compliance.

Next, she discussed a latent print disclosure HFSC provided to the Texas Forensic Science Commission regarding a former examiner that failed to complete database searches. She said "hits" may have been missed. The commission voted in July to not take further action due to the root cause analysis, case review and corrective actions taken by HFSC. However, the corporation's investigation is ongoing. It will rework 140 disposed cases and update the TFSC and the board as the progress.

Ms. Ziemak said 20 analysts have testified this year and four transcripts are being reviewed.

12. **BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR CHARLES EVAN'S PRESENTATION REGARDING PROPOSED EVIDENCE CONSOLIDATION PROJECT:**

HFSC is in the early stages of negotiations with the Houston Police Department (HPD) and the city over transferring responsibility of drug evidence management and storage to HFSC. Mr. Evans discussed the initial phases of the project and progress thus far. The ultimate goal is to improve the efficiency of handling, storage, disposal and the quality of evidence received by HFSC.

The involved parties are discussing storing evidence at a secure downtown facility that previously served as a bank vault, noting security is paramount. HFSC is working with the landlord and city to secure a 30-year lease, potentially following the structure of HFSC's current lease agreement at 500 Jefferson.

He talked through the significant potential savings opportunity with having an on-site incinerator, pointing out that burns would occur several times a week instead of transfers to an external vendor when 3,000 pounds have accumulated. He said it will likely be an 18-month project with several critical items. Mr. Evans indicated the project requires multiple tracks, however, the initial scope will focus on space/facility plans, the incinerator and cost summaries. He described several base documents and regular meetings among the parties to ensure everyone has a clear understanding of task ownership and costs in this multi-phased project. He stated several stakeholders have toured the facility and provided positive feedback, but reiterated project costs will be the determining factor.

13. **ADJOURNMENT:**

Chairwoman Mitchell requested a motion to adjourn the meeting. Director Philip Hilder made a motion to adjourn. Director Moore seconded the motion. The meeting adjourned at 11:49 am.

The undersigned secretary of the board hereby certifies the following are true and correct minutes of the August 13, 2021 virtual meeting of the board.

By: *Amanda DeBerry* Amanda DeBerry, Secretary