



Mayor taps one of San Antonio Four to HFSC board, appoints new chair

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner has appointed Anna Vasquez, one of four women wrongfully convicted and later exonerated in a case that made national headlines, to the Houston Forensic Science Center's board of directors. He also appointed Dr. Stacey Mitchell, a forensic nurse, to be the board's chair.

City Council unanimously confirmed both appointments on Wednesday.

Ms. Vasquez is one of the women who became known as the "San Antonio Four" after the case against them made national news, including false allegations of satanic activity by the women and homophobia in the justice system.

Ms. Vasquez, now the director of outreach and education at the Innocence Project of Texas, replaces Anthony Graves, exonerated of six murders he did not commit, on HFSC's board.

"After spending more than a decade in prison, I feel an obligation to ensure that my story prevents such things from occurring to other innocent people and helps improve the justice system," Ms. Vasquez said. "Serving on HFSC's oversight board and helping to ensure it provides quality, objective science is one way to do that."

Dr. Mitchell, a clinical professor of nursing at Texas A&M University, has served on the board since 2015 and is replacing Nicole Casarez, who has been chair since 2015. Ms. Casarez has served on the board since its creation in 2012.

“I have watched HFSC staff improve processes and systems to increase quality and minimize bias,” Ms. Casarez said. “I am proud of the progress HFSC has made, but it is time for me to step aside and allow someone else lead the agency to the next level.”

Dr. Mitchell has been an important member of the board, and Dr. Peter Stout, HFSC’s CEO and president, said he is excited to see her take the helm.

“We are reluctant to let go of Ms. Casarez’s expertise, guidance and leadership, but we are thankful for her support during these crucial years for HFSC,” Dr. Stout said.

Dr. Mitchell will oversee her first meeting on July 12.

“After years of growth and hard work to build a new, strong foundation for Houston’s crime lab, HFSC is finally being recognized for the progressive path it has chosen to take,” said Dr. Mitchell.

“I am honored to lead HFSC to the next level of greatness and help ensure it lives up to its mission of quality, objective science and transparency,” she added.

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 operates in seven forensic disciplines.

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