



# HFSC Begins Blind Testing in DNA, Latent Prints, National First

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The Houston Forensic Science Center has expanded its blind quality control program to its Forensic Biology and Latent Print sections. This unique program allows HFSC to “blindly” test its analysts and systems, assisting with the elimination of bias while also helping to catch issues that might exist in the processes.

The blind testing program goes beyond the demands of accreditation, which require analysts to undergo periodic proficiency testing. In every crime lab in the nation, however, analysts know when they are taking a proficiency test. Under HFSC’s blind testing program analysts in five sections do not know whether they are performing real casework or simply taking a test. The test materials are introduced into the workflow and arrive at the laboratory in the same manner as all other evidence and casework.

Due to the complexity of interfacing with federal databases, blind samples have been introduced into the Forensic Biology and Latent Print sections in a limited fashion. HFSC is working to expand the program in the coming months.

In the Forensic Biology Section, blind samples have been introduced into the screening area where analysts test evidence to see whether there is biological material present that can be progressed for a full DNA analysis.

In the Latent Print Section, blind tests have also been introduced on the front end in the processing area.

“Ultimately, the goal is to have blind samples included seven of HFSC forensic disciplines,” said Lori Wilson, HFSC Quality Division director. “There is no better way

to get a full picture of whether our processes and procedures are working properly, and to further the goal of eliminating as much bias as possible from our work.”

HFSC first began its blind quality program in September 2015 when blind test cases were introduced into the Toxicology Section. That was expanded in December 2015 to include the Firearms and Controlled Substances sections. The Firearms Section also has a blind verification program. This means that when evidence is examined by a second analyst that individual is unaware of the findings of the previous examiner.

“There have been great challenges in putting this program together, some of them unforeseen and others, as of now, unresolved,” said Dr. Peter Stout, HFSC’s COO and vice president. “However, a year into the project we are pleased with the progress we have made. There is still work to do, but we have made excellent progress.”

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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