

WHAT'S NEWS @ HFSC

HOUSTON FORENSIC SCIENCE CENTER • JANUARY 2019

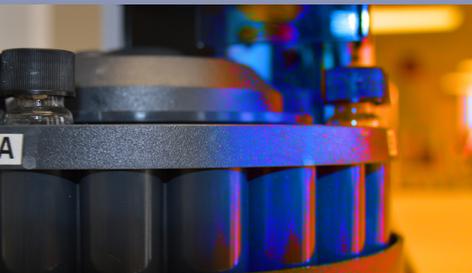
The Story Behind the Scene

By Kaitlin Main, HFSC Crime Scene Investigator

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November 30, 2018.

Many will remember that day as the one when President George H.W. Bush died. I remember that day differently though. At the time of an honorable president's death, I was at another death scene.

One of a 5-year-old boy.

Upon my arrival to the scene, I saw the media crowding around with their cameras and bright lights. I heard dozens of voices speaking into microphones, yelling out questions, clamoring for attention. I braced myself for what I was about to see inside the house and gathered the strength I would need to do my job objectively and with expert care.

Some time later, I exited the house and it was quiet. No more cameras. No more lights. There was only one reporter and one cameraman left, and they were quickly walking away.

As they were leaving they said, "Didn't you hear? President Bush died. We're leaving to cover that."

"That's sad," I thought at first.

But after a moment, I thought, "Someone died here too though."

And the little boy who lost his life never got the chance to be newsworthy during his life. Only in death. And now, only second to someone who had lived a full and vibrant life.

This child never knew his first kiss, true love or children of his own. He missed learning to drive a car. He missed hours of play time, hormones, graduations, successes and failures. He missed life lessons.

I admonished myself for being bitter that a great man of repute died and his family was grieving. But I wondered who was grieving for the boy I was photographing and the horrors I documented that ended his beautiful existence.

In this job, people die every day.

And regardless of whether they were what we glibly consider "innocent victims" or those involved in a dangerous lifestyle, I reflect and remember that they were someone's child. I hope there are people that grieve for them and loved them while I'm simultaneously saddened by the thought of their pain.

November 30, 2018 will not hold the same significance for me that it does for most Americans. My first memory will not be that it was the day a president died. It will be of that little boy. It will be of every piece of evidence I found. Of every photo I took. Of the words I wrote documenting things that most of humanity doesn't want to know exist. And even of the tears I cried for him on my way home from work because I thought someone should cry for what this world has lost.

Those of us who work in this field and see death every day often fall back on gallows humor. "Yes, I see dead people."

But sometimes we really wish we didn't see them.

We look in the face of injustice, are greeted with the constant reminder that neither life nor death is fair, and we know that evil does exist.

Ugliness, grief, pain, blood is my daily bread. And most days I put on my uniform, or as my daughter calls it my "super hero outfit," and try and be the strong woman she sees. I shrug off all the horror and stick with the science, do the job and do it right.

It's the only way I tell myself to make something a little less wrong in this world.





A Few Words From Our PRESIDENT

HOUSTON FORENSIC SCIENCE CENTER

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.

Kaitlin Main, an HFSC crime scene investigator, eloquently put in writing on the front page of this newsletter the struggle and passion associated with the work done daily in this and every other crime lab in the nation.

Yes, the homicides and the sexual assaults _ the crimes that most people find so heinous they are beyond comprehension _ get the most attention in the public and the media. But here, in the labs, as largely anonymous people go about their work, the impact of handling a blood tube in the toxicology lab that is associated with a fatal DWI or a fingerprint from a home burglary can be just as significant.

Real people are behind each of those cases and associated with every item of evidence. They are victims and defendants, family members and loved ones. Each is impacted by the work done by the lab and the contribution we make to ensure the wheels of the criminal justice system operate fairly, objectively and effectively.

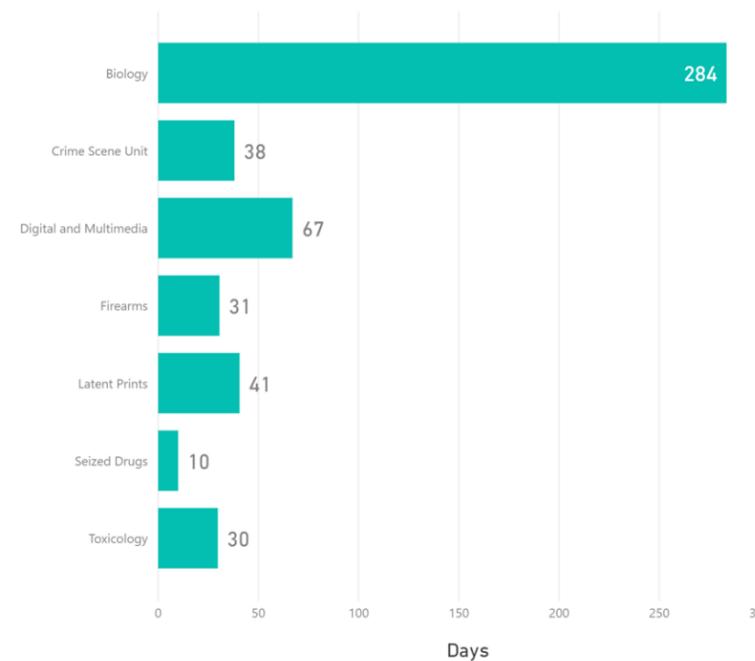
The weight of that responsibility is something we wake up with every morning and go to sleep with each night. It is why we choose to work in a field that will bring neither fame nor fortune, but rather a sense of contribution to the greater good.

It is why we are committed to the right answer at the right time.

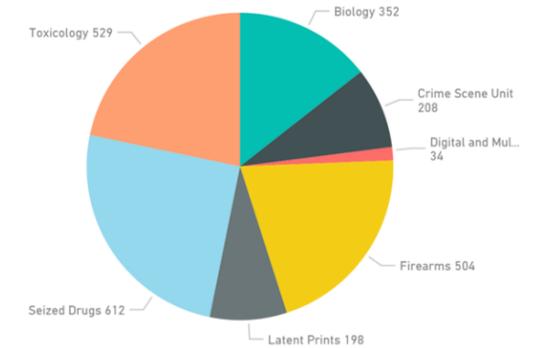
Peter Stout, PH.D.
CEO/President

HFSC At A Glance

Average Turnaround Time for December 2018



Requests Completed by Section



Turnaround Time - Days	64
Completed Requests	2437

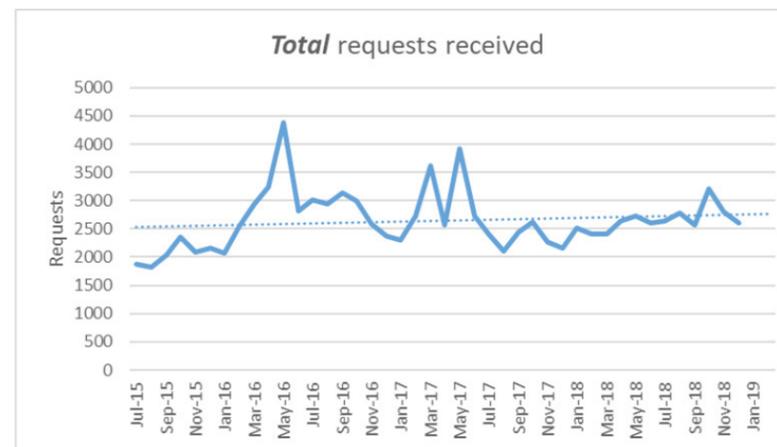
Month Completed

- 01-January
- 02-February
- 03-March
- 04-April
- 05-May
- 06-June
- 07-July
- 08-August
- 09-September
- 10-October
- 11-November
- 12-December

Year Completed

- 2014
- 2015
- 2016
- 2017
- 2018

This data is current as of 12/28/2018.



Turnaround times increased to an average of 64 days across HFSC in December.

A large part of this is because the forensic biology/DNA lab is plowing through its backlog and as older cases are completed the turnaround time goes up.

However, in the coming months a combination of significant events will likely increase turnaround times as well.

The transition to a new Laboratory Information Management System (LIMS,) the move to a new building and a continued effort to eliminate aging backlogs will increase turnaround times and strain resources.

Please be patient.

For more information, please visit www.houstonforensicscience.org

TRANSITIONS

HFSC LAUNCHES NEW SOFTWARE

The Big Move

HFSC'S NEW LAB

The Houston Forensic Science Center's facility move begins in late February with the transition of the latent prints, digital multimedia and administrative functions housed at a leased location on Fannin Street to the new building.

The City of Houston signed a 30-year lease in 2018 for space at 500 Jefferson Street, allowing HFSC to move all its staff and laboratory functions to one location in downtown Houston. Until now, HFSC's staff and operations have been divided between two downtown buildings on eight floors.

The long-term benefits of the move are clear, but in the short-term the physical relocation will slow down production and lead to increased turnaround times, beginning with the latent print and digital multimedia sections.

"Moving a crime lab is a complex operation that is normally spread over several years. HFSC is doing this all _ including building a whole new lab on the 18th floor of 500 Jefferson _ in under a year," said Dr. Peter Stout, HFSC's CEO and president.

"This is not an easy task and we know it will impact stakeholders who need quick, accurate results. We have a plan that we hope will minimize the impact, but we hope for patience as the long-term benefits of this move will be significant for the entire community," he added.

At the moment, construction is ongoing on the office floors that will house the first group, latent prints, moving between February 28 and March 4.

HFSC's corporate address will also change on March 4 to 500 Jefferson St., 13th floor, Houston, Texas 77002. The primary phone number will change as well to 713-929-6760.

Between March 14 and March 18, HFSC's finance and legal departments will move to 500 Jefferson. The digital and multimedia section will be the final group to vacate the Fannin location and will complete their move on March 22.

During the moves, phones and computers will be temporarily unavailable as staff get operations up and running in Jefferson.

HFSC has a team working to think of all the surprises that could pop up along the way, but still expects last-minute kinks during the move. Ongoing communication will prepare stakeholders for delays during the transition.



By DARRELL STEIN
The Houston Forensic Science Center will undergo significant changes in January that will have broad impact on stakeholders and could slowdown operations in the short-term.

Two key dates: January 18 and January 22.

HFSC is launching on January 18 a new, web-based portal for stakeholders to request testing. Once the new portal, called Where's My Result is online, completed lab reports will be emailed to requesters. HFSC's current web pre-log system will **ONLY** be available to download older reports.

The new portal is

user friendly and designed to provide the lab with the information it needs up front to make the process more streamlined and efficient. It will likely take users a few tries to get comfortable with the new site and format, but in the long term it should

help everyone. Second, all disciplines, except for forensic biology/DNA,

will be fully operational on January 22 in HFSC's new Laboratory Information Management system (LIMS.) This impacts all internal operations, from evidence receipt to report release.

HFSC expects operations to slowdown

as analysts and other staff become more proficient at using the new software and processes fall in line with the change.

Staff are currently testing the new software to try to identify glitches before it becomes fully operational.

The long-term impact of these software transitions will be positive, but glitches, surprises and last-minute roadblocks can be expected during launch and in the weeks immediately following. Please be patient as we improve systems that are crucial to the overall mission of providing quality, timely results to stakeholders.



DRINKING AND DRIVING HOUSTON'S PROBLEM

How Houston's growing DUI problem impacts HFSC By Jordan Benton

Houston, we have a problem.

The fourth largest city leads the nation in fatal crashes resulting from driving under the influence of drugs and alcohol, according to National Highway Traffic Safety Administration data reported by the Houston Chronicle. And the deadly trend spreads from the roads into crime labs.

The Houston Forensic Science Center's toxicology section has seen an almost 45 percent increase in requests for testing between 2017 and 2018, a direct result of Houston's DUI problem, which caused more than 3,000 fatal accidents between 2001 and 2016. In addition, HFSC found in 2018 that in 54 percent of tests conducted by the lab drivers had blood alcohol concentrations more than twice the 0.08 g/100 mL legal limit in Texas.

So how is the section dealing with the increased workload?

First, all analysts will be cross-trained to perform all duties and tests. Cross-training analysts helps balance the workload in the long-term _ the problem is finding the time to complete the lengthy training modules.

"In the past we have sacrificed our training needs to meet our productivity level. We realized that while it sufficed as a short-term solution, it greatly harms the section's long-term stability," said Dr. Dayong Lee, HFSC's toxicology section manager.

The toxicology section

analyzes samples for both alcohol and drugs. However, only samples that do not meet the threshold for driving under influence of alcohol _0.1 g/100mL _ go on for drug analysis. All fatal incidents are analyzed for drugs as well. But not all toxicology analysts at HFSC are authorized to do drug analysis.

In addition to cross-training, HFSC is also trying to acquire new technology that will expedite testing procedures. Even if funds for the technology are identified, once the instruments are in-house there is a lengthy validation process before it can be used on casework. This process could also slowdown production in the short term. Dr. Lee created for a conference presentation in 2016 a heat map of the locations for each DUI the lab handles. Further similar research could potentially help stakeholders determine where to station officers to best confront the problem.

"Driving under the influence of drugs and alcohol is a significant threat to innocent members of the community going about their daily lives. HFSC has an obligation to not only help the justice system punish the offenders, but also take measures that could prevent tragedies," Dr. Peter Stout, HFSC's CEO and president, said.

"The hope is that with a combination of process changes and collaboration with stakeholders HFSC will help on multiple fronts."



Houston leads the nation in fatal crashes resulting from driving under the influence of alcohol and drugs, and the problem is almost definitely being underestimated. But the current trend has significant impacts on lab operations as well. HFSC has experienced a 45 percent increase in requests for toxicology testing between 2017 and 2018, and is now working on plans to increase production in the long-term. Between cross-training and new technology, HFSC hopes to have the capacity to more quickly handle requests. The right answer at the right time.



DNA BACKLOG AND TRAINING: WHERE WE ARE



The Houston Forensic Science Center's ambitious plan to eliminate its DNA backlog by sending incoming casework to a private laboratory for testing is on schedule in some areas, delayed in others and running under budget.

The DNA backlog has shrunk from 1,072 requests when the plan launched in July to about 393 as of January 7.

Overall, it appears the plan will effectively meet HFSC's objective to maintain an average 30-day turnaround time on DNA cases, though some unexpected surprises and challenges have popped up along the way.

The \$2 million, 10-month-long plan HFSC launched in July involved sending incoming casework to a private laboratory. During this time, HFSC started cross-training staff to do more parts of the multi-step DNA analysis process to prevent future backlogs while also focusing on eliminating a growing backlog.

HFSC's aggressive training regimen is designed to have more staff proficient in the final, data interpretation portion of DNA testing. This is the part of the process that crime laboratories nationwide have struggled with due to more complex DNA profiles and changes in FBI protocols that have led to the creation about 50 percent more data for analysis.

Seven HFSC analysts began training on DNA processing in July and are to complete that module at the end of this month. Three others began training in July on the screening process or the part of the DNA testing when biological materials — such as blood or semen — are identified. They are on track to complete

The Houston Forensic Science Center's plan to eliminate a growing backlog and create a sustainable process that will allow it to maintain an average 30-day turnaround time on DNA cases is running under budget. Some parts of the plan are on schedule, while others have been delayed due to the government shutdown.

this module in February.

However, a plan to train seven analysts in the final interpretation step has stalled due to the government shutdown. HFSC's plan for this module is to supplement in-house training with an external program that would be paid for using grant funds from the National Institute of Justice. The analysts had been scheduled to start that training in December, however, the release of funds has been delayed by the government shutdown and will not begin until the grant dollars arrive.

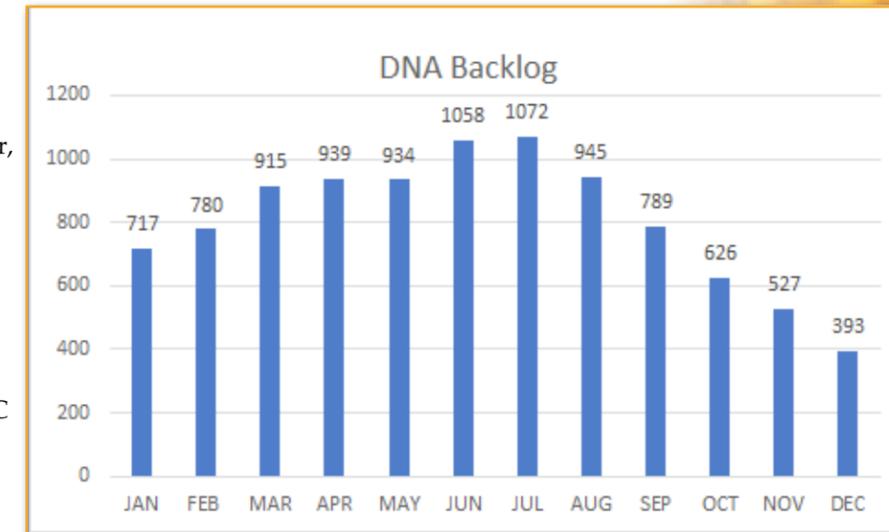
"It is unfortunate that a government shutdown has an impact on crucial elements of the justice system, but HFSC will continue with the rest of its plan to ensure that when the money arrives other parts in place to ensure a successful outcome," said Dr. Peter Stout, HFSC's CEO and president.

"We believe that at the end of this project we will be able to maintain an average 30-day turnaround time on DNA requests, which in the end will help improve public safety in the City of Houston."

HFSC has already sent more than 620 new cases to an outsource laboratory for testing. More than 230 have been returned and will be reviewed by HFSC staff — as required by the FBI — to determine if the DNA profiles created are eligible for upload into the national DNA database, the Combined DNA Index System (CODIS.)

The cost for that testing has until now fallen below the projected \$1.4 million and HFSC has so far spent about

\$500,000 for that work, with more than \$160,000 coming from grants. The plan is to pay for the remainder of the private testing with \$800,000 in grant dollars, but the money has yet to arrive and as a result HFSC may have to complete some of the work in house. In addition,



The graph to the left depicts the backlog from January to December 2018. The backlog numbers peaked in July and began decreasing following the launch of the outsource project.

turnaround times for sexual assault kits sent to the private laboratory are running at about a 120-day turnaround time rather than the expected 60 days. HFSC is working with the lab to shrink that time but is expecting delays over the coming months.

Finally, HFSC's upcoming laboratory move, which will require operations to shutdown for sometime, will create additional challenges and delays.

"The DNA section staff are dedicated to HFSC's mission of providing quality, timely results to stakeholders and despite the challenges we know this will ultimately benefit everyone, including the lab," said Courtney Head, HFSC's forensic biology/DNA manager.

HONOR HFSC STAFF GIVEN PATRIOT AWARD

“WE ARE ALWAYS PROUD AND HONORED TO SUPPORT OUR MILITARY AND VETERANS”



The Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) has presented the Patriot Award to Crime Scene Unit supervisors Alison Hutchens and Carina Haynes for their support of Brandon Kellett during his recent reserve deployment.

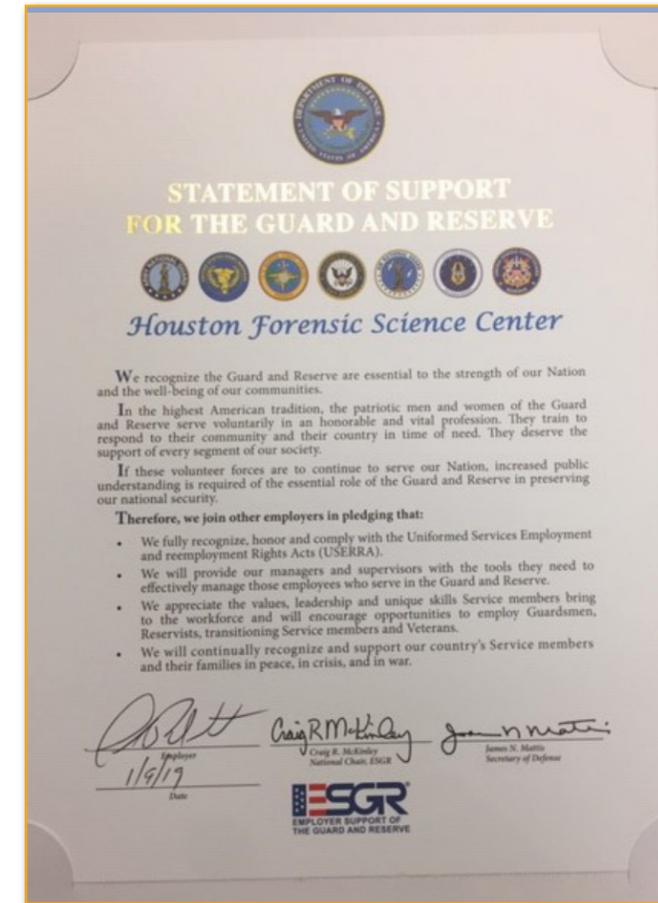
The ESGR is a Department of Defense program that encourages cooperation between employers and reservists and works to resolve any conflicts that might arise.

Brandon nominated Alison and Carina for the award because he said they had been supportive and understanding during his nearly yearlong deployment to the Sinai Desert.

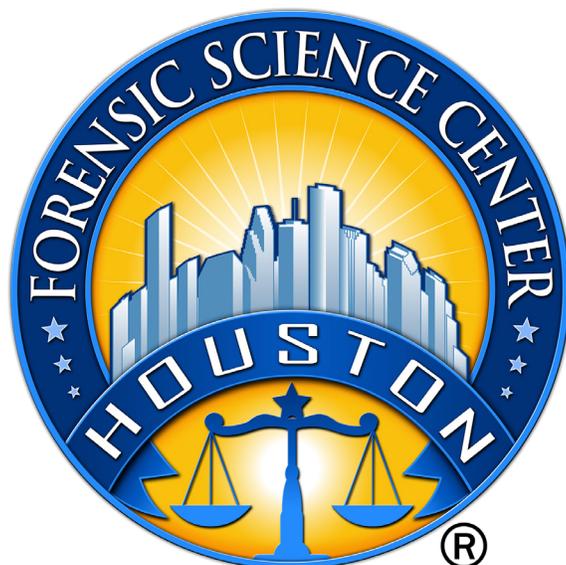
“They never hesitated to support this reserve deployment despite the strains HFSC and the Crime Scene Unit were facing at the time,” Brandon said in the moments before George Nami of the National Guard presented the award. “This support made it so much easier to complete my deployment and fulfill my reserve duties without the added stress of an employment conflict.”

Dr. Peter Stout, HFSC’s CEO and president, also signed a statement committing to support the National Guard and reserves.

“We are always proud and honored to support our military and veterans,” said Dr. Stout, who served as an officer in the U.S. Navy.



**HFSC's ADDRESS AND PHONE NUMBER WILL CHANGE
ON MARCH 4, 2019 TO 500 JEFFERSON, 13TH FLOOR,
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