



# President's Council Praises HFSC for Independence, Blind-Testing Program

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The President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology (PCAST), an advisory group of leading scientists and engineers appointed by the President, has praised the Houston Forensic Science Center for its independent model and for implementing a blind quality control program. The final report is attached.

"HFSC is flattered to have been recognized by this prestigious council and will continue to work toward forensic excellence that best serves the justice system and the citizens of Houston," said Dr. Daniel Garner, HFSC's CEO and president.

The council in its report to the president titled *Forensic Science in the Criminal Courts: Ensuring Scientific Validity of Feature-Comparison Methods* noted that Houston, after numerous problems in its crime lab, decided to make the forensic disciplines independent of law enforcement. PCAST stated that the 2009 report by the National Academy of Sciences recommended forensic labs be independent of law enforcement and prosecutors, in part to make them more objective. Houston, the president's council said, "succeeded in transitioning the laboratory into an independent forensic science center."

HFSC is overseen by a nine-member board of directors appointed by the mayor and confirmed by City Council. The directors, however, can only be removed for malfeasance. The design is meant to "insulate the Center from undue influence by police, prosecutors, elected officials or special interest groups," the report stated.

Later in its report, PCAST calls for forensic laboratories to institute blind proficiency testing which would not only help pinpoint quality issues that might exist in the process, but also help address contextual bias. The report points out that HFSC has implemented blind proficiency testing in the firearms, controlled substances and toxicology sections and plans on expanding the program to DNA and latent prints.

“PCAST believes that test-blind proficiency testing of forensic examiners should be vigorously pursued, with the expectation that it should be in wide use, at least in large laboratories, within the next five years,” the report states, adding that it cannot yet be required because procedures have not been implemented.

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