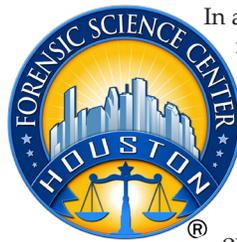


# WHAT'S NEWS @ HFSC

HOUSTON FORENSIC SCIENCE CENTER • SEPTEMBER 2019

## HFSC'S NEW HOME: WHAT AN IMPROVED LAB MEANS FOR HOUSTON

By Jordan Benton



In about eight weeks, 18 months of planning and construction will yield the final result: the move of Houston's crime laboratory to a new facility specifically designed for a forensic operation.

The long-term benefits are clear: a more efficient operation with work done in laboratories designed to prevent contamination and serve the workflow. In the short-term, however, there will be lab shutdowns and slowdowns that will impact the justice system. HFSC has contracted with commercial laboratories to decrease some of the pain, but stakeholders need to be aware of the potential impacts. (More on this on pages 6 and 7.)

But come January, all of the City of Houston's forensic testing will be completed in a laboratory designed to be functional and efficient without costly bells and whistles.

Most municipalities and jurisdictions take years \_ and even decades \_ to build a forensic laboratory with a taxpayer-funded price tag in the tens of millions. HFSC did not have the time nor the funding to build a facility like that and instead opted to work with a landlord, John Quinlan, who could fund the construction costs and amortize the price into the life of a 30-year lease.

That plan is coming to fruition on the 18th floor of 500 Jefferson in downtown Houston.

The 18th floor has been gutted from top to bottom to suit a reliable and quality design for all operations: forensic biology, seized drugs, toxicology and latent prints.

Until now, Houston's forensic laboratory has been housed in an improvised office space in the Houston Police Department's downtown headquarters. HFSC struggled to purchase new, much-needed equipment because of a lack of space and electrical capacity. It needed to put in place greater quality controls to prevent contamination and the

set up made lab tours difficult.

The new lab eliminates those issues. Features like specialized plumbing, air flow to limit contamination, durable flooring, medical grade ceiling panels, increased electrical capacity and more will accommodate growing operations over the next 30 plus years.

"We've gone from seeing the space to being close to living in the space," said Charles Evans, HFSC's director of business development, who is overseeing the facility project. "We've been persistent because we needed this change. A lot came into play, including the right people in our corner. Without the support we received from the City of Houston, the building's landlord and team and the Houston Police Department, we would not have gotten this far."

HFSC's will have about the same square footage in the new facility \_ approximately 80,000 square feet \_ but designed to maximize the area. This means sections like toxicology and seized drugs can make room for new equipment, such as fume hoods and other instruments used for casework. The quality and research and development divisions will also have a shared lab space for the first time. Quality will use the area in part to create mock cases for the blind quality control cases.

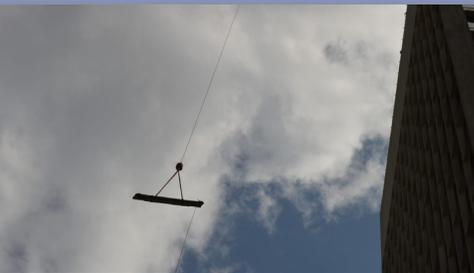
The basement in 500 Jefferson will accommodate the crime scene unit (CSU) and a shooting range and shooting tank for firearms. CSU will process evidence in a more controlled area while the firearms section will be able to more safely fire weapons for upload into the ballistics database. The basement's walls will be armored to protect from bullets, ricochets and shrapnel. Finally, the lab will be equipped with new furniture and large windows to allow visitors to peek in at operations without entering the labs.

"We signed the lease to the building last October. There is 13 months between when we signed the lease and when the labs begin to move. This was quick, and now we can fully establish our independence," said Dr. Peter Stout, HFSC's CEO and president.

### INSIDE THIS EDITION



**Don't forget to register today for HFSC's upcoming symposium on evidence handling!**



**4 Learn how HFSC will ensure quality before, during and after the move**



**6 Read important information about move delays and shutdowns**



**8 HFSC's crime scene unit helps improve public safety**



# A Few Words From Our PRESIDENT

HOUSTON FORENSIC SCIENCE CENTER

**Peter Stout, PH.D.**  
CEO/President

Eighteen months after first seeing the building and a little over a year after signing a contract, Houston is nearing the finish line on a project that normally takes a city years to complete: it's getting a brand new crime laboratory.

It's exciting and well overdue. It will allow the Houston Forensic Science Center to become more efficient and better ensure the quality of its work if for no other reason than the air conditioning system is specifically designed for a forensic laboratory. The electrical capacity will allow HFSC to upgrade equipment to better meet the community's needs and provide a better working environment for our staff.

But as the move gets underway there will be short-term pain. There will be slowdowns, delays and shutdowns. We are doing our best to communicate what this will look like and also to find solutions for urgent cases since crime will not wait for us to complete our move.

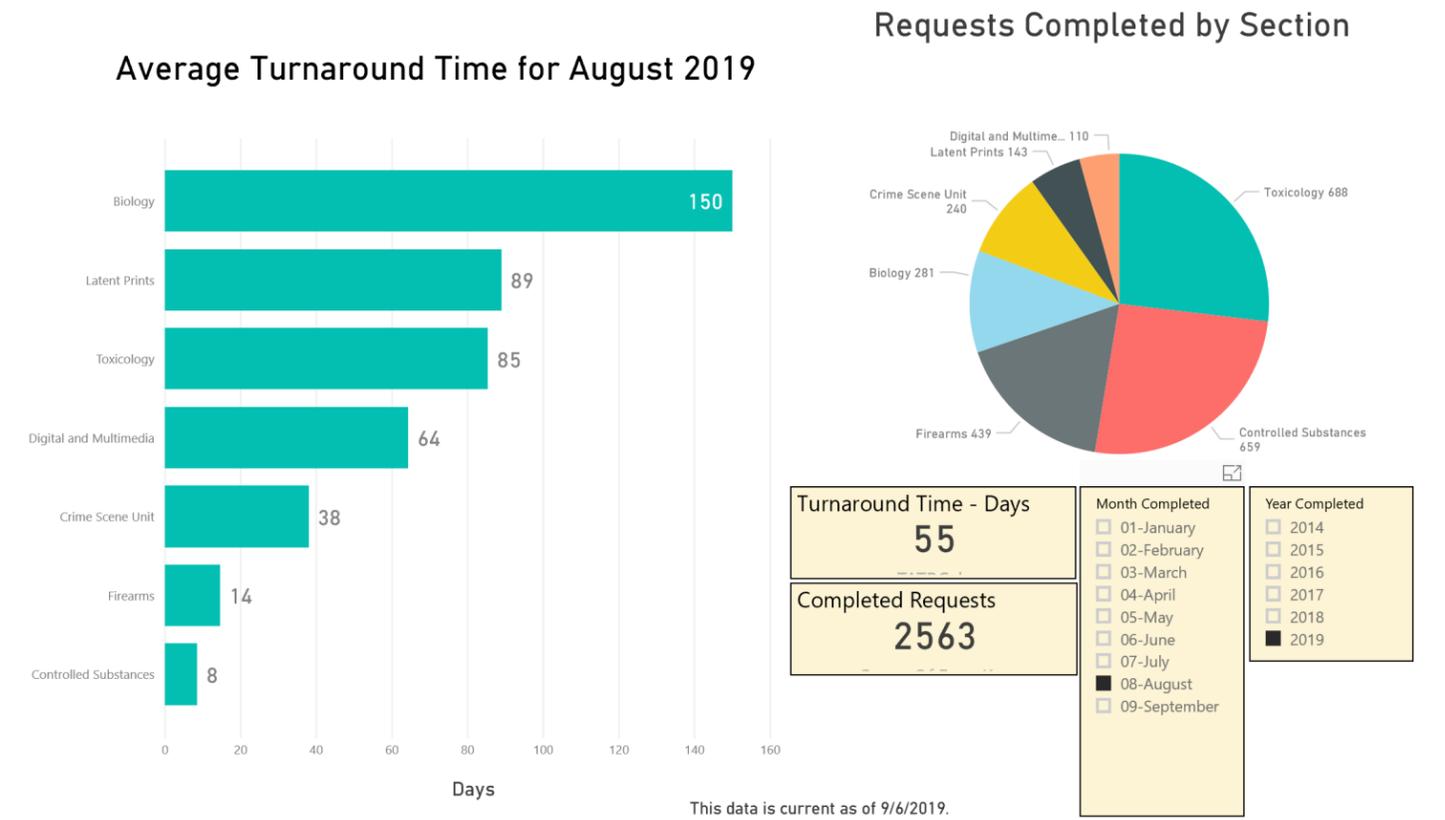
We will continue to communicate with stakeholders about the move and how it will impact operations and we understand there will be difficult moments and decisions to make as we struggle with this complex move.

We are, however, confident that this will ultimately benefit the City of Houston, the justice system and the community.

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.

# HFSC At A Glance



The Houston Forensic Science Center's overall average turnaround time for August was 55 days, a little higher than our declared goal, but not terrible considering staff are planning and preparing for what will be a complex, multi-faceted move.

During this tumultuous time, we would rather slowdown operations and take more time than risk making errors. And so, although the laboratory moves themselves are not in full swing, managers, supervisors and staff are all involved in various planning stages for this once-in-a-lifetime event.

Turnaround times will tick up further as the move progresses and backlogs will grow. It will take through the first quarter of 2020 for operations to get back to some level of normalcy.

It will be worth it in the end though. Of that we are certain.

For more information, please visit [www.houstonforensicscience.org](http://www.houstonforensicscience.org)

# QUALITY AND THE MOVE

BY ERIKA ZIEMAK  
QUALITY DIRECTOR

## The Big Move **WHAT WE'VE DONE SO FAR**

Make no mistake about it: building a forensic laboratory is complex, multi-layered and difficult.

HFSC's new crime laboratory will have one-through air conditioning for each separate section, helping to prevent contamination between disciplines, and for DNA analysis, within the section's different testing steps. To do this, a massive, city-block-long crane had to lift multiple three-story high exhaust fans and an emergency generator to stories to the roof of 500 Jefferson.

The mechanical parts and vents take up additional square footage on several floors.

Speaking of floors, laboratories require specific flooring to prevent contamination. HFSC's labs have an epoxy floor.

Windows line the lab's corridors so visitors can see the operations without risking themselves \_ or the operations \_ by walking through.

The basement's armored walls are in place and the shooting tank has been lowered into the area.

Furniture has arrived and been assembled. Fume hoods have been installed and walls have been painted.

On October 1, HFSC should officially get the keys and then final piping work will be done before the move begins.



Epoxy floors have been put down for all laboratory spaces



Armor will cover the walls of the shooting range being built in the basement



Glass windows separate the labs from a corridor to allow for tours

Relocating a forensic laboratory is no easy feat. And while all at HFSC are eager to be up and running at full capacity in the new facility, there are steps that must be taken to ensure the quality of the work remains constant and isn't compromised.

Ensuring the quality of forensic work involves steps that are not always needed in a research laboratory in part because the items being tested are "unknowns" \_ evidence that can come from anywhere and be anything. And, possibly more important, the work impacts lives and so HFSC has an obligation to take measures with instrumentation to ensure all is operating as expected.

So, what does this look like?

For starters, all the instruments and equipment need to be carefully packed to ensure each one arrives to the 18th floor of 500 Jefferson in the same working condition as it was in the previous facility. The instruments and equipment will be transported by professionals and reinstalled in the new space, but the process does not end there. Each instrument will need to be performance checked. A performance check is a quality control measure that confirms the relocated instruments and equipment are operating with the same degree of accuracy and achieving the same results as they did before they were moved from the previous facility.

The details of each

performance check will vary from instrument to instrument and section to section, but its overall purpose is to ensure the validity of the forensic results. Once each section completes its performance checks, the supporting documentation will be submitted to the quality division for review. Sections will resume casework only



**HFSC MUST  
PERFORMANCE  
CHECK EACH  
INSTRUMENT TO  
ENSURE QUALITY**

after the quality division has reviewed and approved the findings.

Depending on the section and the instruments, this will take anywhere from a few days to several weeks. HFSC understands the impact it has on stakeholders when the city's forensic lab is shutdown, however, the entire justice system understands the quality of the work is of the utmost importance. These performance checks are what allow HFSC to guarantee that quality and while the downtime impacts all stakeholders, the community will benefit in the long-term from HFSC's move to a laboratory specifically designed for forensics.

# THE BIG MOVE DELAYS AND SHUTDOWNS

*What you need to know about operations during the move*

The first two sections to move to 500 Jefferson will be forensic biology/DNA and latent print processing, impacting operations in those disciplines on October 1.

Two-thirds of HFSC's staff moved into 500 Jefferson by the end of May, so the remaining staff are analysts that work in the laboratories, managers, supervisors and a few support people.

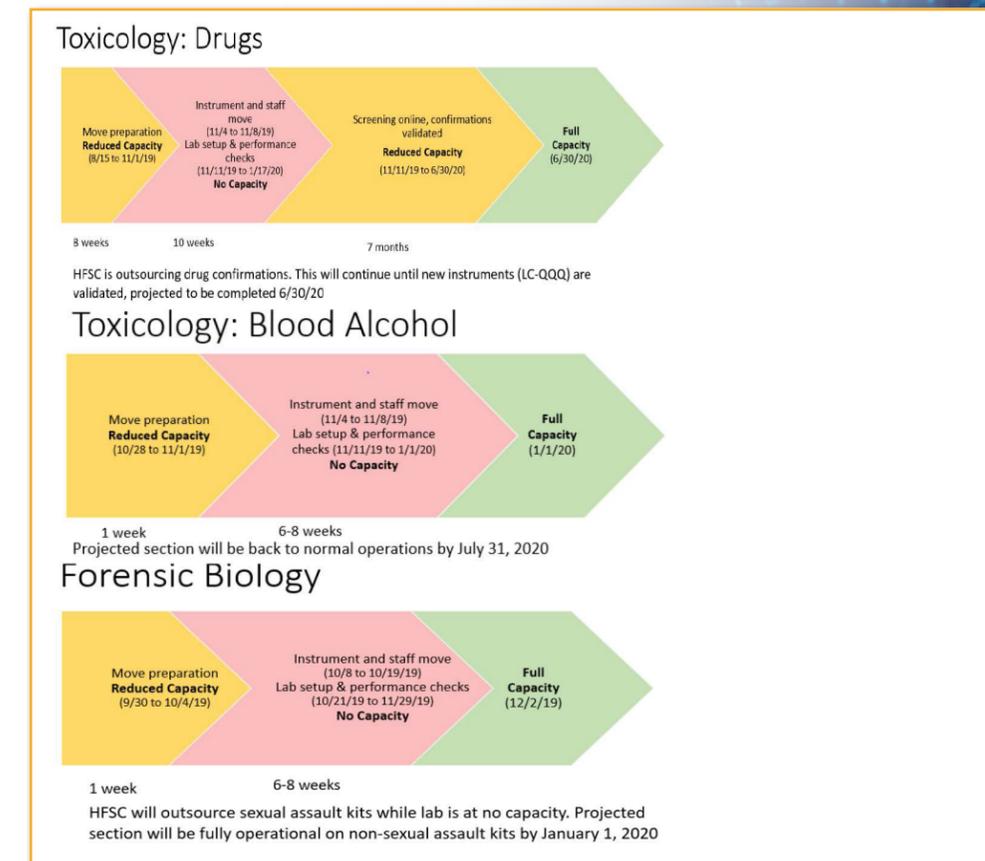
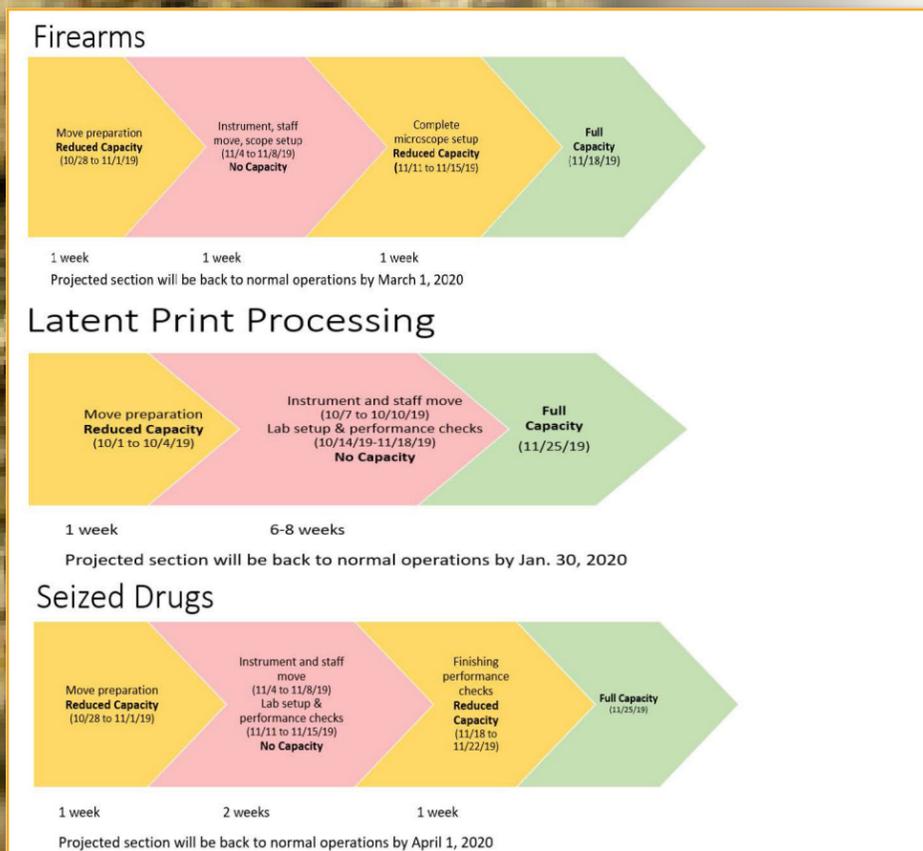
Forensic biology will begin to slowdown operations on September 30 as it prepares to move its remaining staff and people between October 8 and October 19. The lab will shutdown operations completely on October 8 and will remain shutdown until after Thanksgiving. During those weeks, laboratory personnel and quality division staff will run performance checks on the sensitive instruments to ensure they run as expected following the move. The section will be up and running at full capacity by December 2, but turnaround times will be a little longer as they work through the backlog that builds during the shutdown. HFSC will send sexual assault kits to a private laboratory for processing during the shutdown and expects to be caught up by January 2020.

Latent print processing will

begin slowing down operations on October 1. Instruments and staff will begin moving October 7 when operations will shutdown completely. Latent print processing operations will remain shutdown until November 18 and the section expects to be at full capacity by November 25. They too will have accumulated a backlog during the shutdown but expect to have it resolved by January 30.

Seized drugs, toxicology and firearms will move in November. Operations in those sections will begin to slowdown the last week in October, though toxicology stopped doing drug analysis this summer when fume hoods were moved from the old laboratory to the new facility. Toxicology will have the longest downtime because new, more high-tech instruments are being brought online in the new lab. It will take months to validate the methods and performance check the instruments. During that time, drug analysis will be done by a private laboratory.

HFSC has made arrangements to handle urgent cases while operations are shutdown. To find out what to do in the event of an emergency, please either contact the section manager or call 713-929-6760.



# CSU RIGHT ANSWER, RIGHT TIME

By Jordan Benton



The Houston Forensic Science Center's fully civilianized and accredited Crime Scene Unit's improved evidence collection and systematic investigative techniques have become a crucial component in the city's ability to improve public safety.

An effective CSU \_ backed by a quality, efficient forensic laboratory that provides the right answer at the right time \_ can deliver the objective information so other parts of the justice system can operate properly.

In Houston, a years-long journey to move in that direction after years of missteps and scandals is bearing fruit and the results can be seen in the outcomes of investigations.

Recently, for example, an armed robber shot and killed a gas station clerk, an all-too-familiar headline in Houston. Collecting evidence in a location where hundreds of innocent people mill about every day \_ leaving behind DNA and fingerprints \_ can be a challenge. But HFSC's crime scene investigators have become adept at gathering information about

*HFSC's civilianized crime scene unit provides the justice system with systematically collected evidence leading to investigative results that improve public safety. The unit, however, has only about 20 CSIs meaning only the most violent crimes receive this specialized treatment.*

the homicide and pinpointing where they might find credible, pertinent evidence.

In that recent robbery, for example, security video footage provided the CSI on the scene with important information: the suspect had jumped over the counter and touched it with his hand.

Without gloves.

The CSI dusted the surface of the counter and developed a palm print. HFSC's latent print section uploaded the palm print into the fingerprint database \_ which has thousands of fingerprints and palm prints of convicted criminals. That palm print "hit" against someone already in the system, providing law enforcement investigators with enough evidence for prosecutors to file capital murder charges.

At the moment, however, HFSC only has the resources to respond to the most violent crimes \_ largely homicides, officer-involved



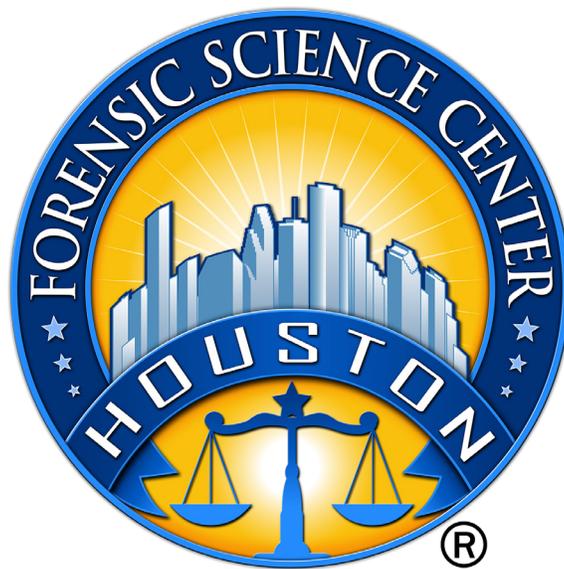
shootings and baby deaths \_ meaning specially trained CSIs are not responding to scenes such as property crimes and most aggravated assaults.

"Houston needs more people and resources



so experienced crime scene investigators can respond to some of the less violent \_ but no less important crimes \_ that plague our city," said Jerry Pena, director of HFSC's crime scene unit and digital multimedia division.

"Allowing each part of the system to focus on the work they are trained to do yields the best results and improves public safety."



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