



Houston Forensic Science Center, Inc.

Board of Directors Public Meeting ~ Minutes ~

Friday, March 11, 2022

www.houstonforensicscience.org

1. **CALL TO ORDER:**

At 9 a.m., Board Chairwoman Stacey Mitchell called the meeting to order.

The Houston Forensic Science Center, Inc. (“HFSC” and/or the “corporation”) board of directors (the “board”) convened this in-person meeting on Friday, March 11, 2022, in the City Hall Council Annex Chamber, 900 Bagby St. (public level), Houston, Texas 77002. In a manner permitted by the corporation’s bylaws, the meeting was called by providing all directors with notice of the date, time and purpose of the meeting at least three days before the scheduled date.

In accordance with Chapter 551 of the Texas Government Code (Texas Open Meetings Act) a notice of this meeting was posted on the bulletin board located on the exterior wall of the City Hall building at 901 Bagby on March 8.

2. **ROLL CALL:**

The following board members were present in-person:

Chairwoman Stacey Mitchell
Vice Chairwoman Mary Lentschke
Philip Hilder
Francisco Medina
Vanessa Goodwin
Lois Moore
Vicki Huff
Tracy Calabrese

The following board member was absent:

Anna Vasquez

The following board member arrived late:

Ellen Cohen

Chairwoman Mitchell declared a quorum was present noting that all members were physically present in-person.

3. **PUBLIC COMMENT:**

Chairwoman Mitchell gave members of the public an opportunity to address the board. No members of the public addressed the board.

4. **REVIEW AND APPROVAL OF MINUTES FROM PRIOR MEETING:**

Following a motion by Director Francisco Medina and seconded by Director Philip Hilder, the board unanimously approved the January 14, 2022 meeting minutes.

5. **CHAIRWOMAN MITCHELL’S REPORT:**

The chairwoman noted recent changes in how board business is conducted and reaffirmed her commitment to ensuring the board operates efficiently and effectively. She asked all members to review previous meetings and provide her with feedback on the agenda items they deemed most beneficial to their work.

Next, she reminded members of the next board meeting on May 13, 2022 and announced that a special board meeting might be called before that date to vote on a few time-sensitive matters. She then reminded the board of previous discussions regarding HFSC's eligibility for federal relief funds provided by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). The funding is now part of Mayor Sylvester Turner and the Houston City Council's public safety initiative called, One Safe Houston, which allocates an additional \$1.5 million to HFSC. Once details are finalized, the board will need to move forward with a public meeting to consider approval of all necessary legal agreements.

6. **BOARD CRIME SCENE UNIT WORKING GROUP'S STATUS REPORT:**

Vice Chairwoman Mary Lentschke began by discussing issues the working group considered from the City of Houston Office of Inspector General's report. Those four focus areas were insufficient personnel, inflexible scheduling, a hostile work environment and the loss of HR as a safety valve in HFSC's crime scene unit (CSU).

She announced that the CSU's director Carina Haynes made several changes to transform the unit since the issued OIG report, noting she hired more supervisors and support staff. Ms. Haynes has provided supervisors with several trainings to help improve their skills, including leadership. Additionally, she implemented a new schedule to address staff concerns. The vice chairwoman reported that 86 percent of staff were happy with the schedule change based on a recent survey.

Next, the vice chairwoman looked at whether the changes positively affected morale and the work environment. There was a 71 percent positive change in the communication within the unit and a 93 percent change regarding the ability to trust the CSU director. She then outlined some of the areas still left for improvement, such as gossip, favoritism and supervisor consistency. Nevertheless, the vice chairwoman said CSU is now in a much better place than last year.

The working group plans to address the final issue of concern, the loss of HR as a safety valve, with the assistance of HFSC's senior leadership. The goal will be to identify areas for improvement, review HFSC policies and make recommendations to ensure employees have the support they need.

7. **PRESIDENT AND CEO DR. PETER STOUT'S REPORT:**

Dr. Stout first pointed out that HFSC is disproportionately affected by violent crime across all technical groups, causing every section to have backlogs. He explained the proposed \$5.9 million fiscal year 2023 budget increase would not reverse backlogs but merely limit its growth. Harris County courts are also struggling with an estimated backlog of some 135,000 criminal cases. The county also estimates at least two years to make a significant dent in that backlog even though 97% of criminal cases will resolve through plea agreements. Director Philip Hilder asked if cases could be prioritized better since a lot of time is consumed with processing cases that are resolved by agreement. Dr. Stout stated that the corporation is actively collaborating with its stakeholders to find a solution to the issue.

He touched on the challenges of rising homicides and its workload on the entire lab, especially CSU. In 2021, 473 people were homicide victims in Houston. Dr. Stout said that significantly impacts HFSC, noting an even higher surge in evidence, record requests, subpoenas as well as rush requests for testing as the cases move to trial. CSU scene responses increased by 40% since 2019 and CSIs processed 68% more vehicles. The group also collected 24,000 items of evidence last year – a 22% increase over 2019. He highlighted HFSC's receipt of 344 subpoenas for testimony in February 2022 versus only 32 for the same time last year. Those subpoenas were primarily issued for 2016 and 2017 violent crime cases.

Dr. Stout briefly discussed the pressure to increase wages and the limited capacity in finding personnel, materials, instruments and outsourcing DNA and toxicology cases. To date, three analysts in the digital multimedia section resigned to start federal positions with a much higher pay rate. He explained that the proposed budget would allocate some funding to provide more raises and increase wages for some entry-level administrative roles.

Lastly, he explained the different steps in the budget process, highlighting that the board first approves the increase, then the budget goes through the city, where he anticipates more conversations with Mayor Sylvester Turner and the finance team. Finally, he stated the city would finalize the budget and decide sometime in June.

8. **QUALITY DIRECTOR ERIKA ZIEMAK'S REPORT:**

Ms. Ziemak reported that the quality division met its January and February submission targets for blind quality control samples and verifications.

Next, she announced that the Journal of Forensic Sciences officially accepted the group's firearms' blind quality controls manuscript submission for publication titled, "*Blind Testing in Firearms: Preliminary Results from a Blind Quality Control Program.*" She then mentioned a quality specialist presented a publication titled, "*Does Image Editing Improve the Quality of Latent Prints?*" at the American Academy of Forensic Sciences.

Ms. Ziemak then explained one disclosure HFSC provided to the Texas Forensic Science Commission regarding the forensic biology/DNA section. The disclosure centered around the section inadvertently consuming an incorrect evidence item for a 2010 HPD case that required additional testing. To prevent future occurrences in consumption cases, she said the quality division implemented an independent verification step for evidence items and a review of the related documentation. The commission voted not to take further action due to the root cause analysis and corrective action taken by HFSC.

The quality division will conduct annual internal audits from March 7 through May 27. She noted they recently completed the internal audit for seized drugs, and there were no findings.

Ms. Ziemak then noted a virtual training was held in February that focused on technical assessor training. Twenty-two HFSC employees participated and shared positive feedback about their experience.

In conclusion, she reported that eight analysts had testified this year and four transcripts are being evaluated.

9. **TREASURER AND CFO DAVID LEACH'S REPORT:**

Mr. Leach first noted that the FY23 budget would help keep the laboratory's current issues from worsening.

He gave an overall look into HFSC's spending, highlighting that it spent most of its FY22 budget on personnel and services. Personnel expenses account for 70 percent of its total business spending. Additionally, he anticipates HFSC will increase its capital and grant spending in the FY23 budget.

Mr. Leach explained the logic behind the corporation maintaining a zero balance in its bank account. The zero-balance account is limited to the processing of payments and is not used to maintain a running balance.

Next, he discussed HFSC's spending priorities in a \$39,370 million budget request for FY23, less than three months before the depletion of the government funding. The upcoming budget proposes a 21% increase in revenue which is about \$6 million over the year prior. In addition, the budget includes considerable increases in salaries, a \$1.8 million difference in spending from the cash-flow account, 21 additional employees, equipment, supplies and more.

9a. **CONSIDER APPROVAL OF HFSC'S FY23 BUDGET PROPOSAL:**

Mr. Leach asked members to approve HFSC's \$39,370 million budget for FY23.

Director Lois Moore then made a motion to approve the proposed FY23 budget, and Vice Chairwoman Lentschke seconded the motion. The board unanimously approved the motion.

10. **ADJOURNMENT:**

Chairwoman Mitchell requested a motion to adjourn the meeting. Director Medina made a motion to adjourn. Director Hilder seconded the motion. The meeting adjourned at 10:46 a.m.

The undersigned secretary of the board hereby certifies the following are true and correct minutes of the Mar. 11, 2022 public meeting of the board.

By: *Amanda DeBerry* Amanda DeBerry, Secretary