



# Houston Forensic Science Center, Inc.

Board of Directors

Public Meeting

~ Minutes ~

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Friday, January 12, 2024

[www.hfsctx.gov](http://www.hfsctx.gov)

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## 1. CALL TO ORDER:

At 9:00 a.m., 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, January 12, 2024, 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 January 9, 2024.

## 2. ROLL CALL:

The following board members were present in-person:

Chairwoman Stacey Mitchell
Philip Hilder
Anna Vasquez
Joni Baird
Vicki Huff
Ellen Cohen
Tracy Calabrese

The following board members arrived late:

Vice Chairwoman Vanessa Goodwin (approx. 9:02am)
Jed Silverman (approx. 9:13am)

The following board members were absent:

Lois Moore
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Chairwoman Mitchell declared a quorum was present.

## 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 Vasquez, seconded by Director Baird, the board unanimously approved the November 17, 2023 meeting minutes.

**5. CHAIRWOMAN MITCHELL'S REPORT:**

Chairwoman Mitchell greeted the board with optimism for the new year and new City of Houston administration. She expressed hope that the strong relationship between HFSC and the city would continue. In addition, she reminded the board about HFSC's internal company meetings, encouraging them to attend for continued exposure to HFSC's operations and culture.

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

To begin his report, Dr. Stout provided updates for each section. Currently, forensic biology (F.Bio) and firearms sections are of particular interest due to the increase in homicide cases. For F.Bio, the key challenges are staff recruitment/turnover rates, extensive training periods, increased outsourcing costs, and priority case management. To further expand on these topics, Dr. Stout explained that the training for DNA writers and interpreters is complex and requires months of training in order to ensure the staff are ready before being allowed to work on cases. Because of the extensive and complex training, the pool of candidates readily available for hire is not large. In addition, only four accredited commercial laboratories exist that can process sexual assault cases, and they are running at maximum capacity. Therefore, their pricing has increased by about 80%, and this increase in expenses is causing HFSC to exhaust the F.Bio. federal grant funds faster than expected. As for the firearms section, they are facing similar challenges. With the lack of examiners (about five short) and long training timeline, the firearms section will be backlogged for the next two years, at least. Currently, the section is trying to secure an outsourcing agreement with the Tarrant County lab; however, even Tarrant County is limited in capacity to process HFSC's cases. In both sections, the priority case management is tricky to maneuver and balance since both the Houston Police department (HPD) and the Harris County District Attorney's Office (HCDAO) want their cases to be processed at a faster rate due to the increase in backlogged homicide cases. In the seized drugs section, their pressure is coming from the fact that the majority of jail inmates are held in relation to some type of seized drugs case, and the number of inmates keeps growing. Once again, the section is short on staff by five analysts, and they are waiting on three more trainees to be signed off by early 2024. Their backlog will continue to grow until the three trainees are able to join the section as trained analysts, which should help maintain the backlog for now. Also, the section is in the process of negotiating an outsourcing contract with a commercial laboratory in the Dallas/Fort Worth area to help with low priority requests. Plus, the section received grant funds to implement liquid chromatography technology, which will help with complex cases. Between the training and new technology implementation, this takes away the analysts' time on processing requests at a normal rate. Next, Dr. Stout covered toxicology's main challenges, which are recruitment and training. The section is training their new staff in blood alcohol in order to allow experienced staff to train in drug testing. However, a commercial demand exists for toxicologists where the analysts can find employment with better salaries and less stressors, such as the lack of testifying in court. Overall, the toxicology section is able to maintain their backlog for now. The crime scene unit (CSU) has cleared their backlogs. Due to limited staff, CSU is only able to respond to certain types of calls when they should be responding to more types of calls. Hence, the CSU section is trying to recruit more investigators. At the same time, the section faces a high turnover rate due to the mental health impact of the job's nature. Another issue is that CSU spends the most time in the courthouse, waiting to testify. Out of all the sections, CSU has the highest time spent preparing for trial followed by waiting in court. Lastly, digital multimedia is doing well. The use of ARPA funds has helped the section in terms of training and equipment needs. The section is actively cross training all of their analysts in different tasks to help make the section more efficient in maintaining their requests.

**7. CONSIDER APPROVAL OF CONTRACT FOR DNA OUTSOURCING SERVICES BETWEEN SIGNATURE SCIENCE AND HFSC:**

Chairwoman Mitchell refreshed the board's memory by informing them that the contract renewal will continue aiding the forensic biology section with their backlog management, funded by FY2023 Bureau of Justice Assistance

(BJA) DNA Capacity Enhancement and Backlog Reduction (CEBR) federal grant. This contract is fundamental to the section's operational needs.

Following a motion by Director Cohen, seconded by Director Hilder, the board unanimously approved the contract between Signature Science and HFSC and authorized Dr. Stout to execute the agreement on the board's behalf.

**8. QUALITY SPECIALIST MRS. JACKELINE MORAL'S REPORT:**

To begin, Mrs. Moral shared with the board that the quality division completed their monthly goals for November and December before giving an overview of all the blind quality controls submitted in 2023. She reminded the board that the goal of the blind quality control program is to test analysts on their proficiency and accuracy levels when processing requests. This confirms to the stakeholders that HFSC is a reliable lab. To date, the quality division has administered 3,011 tests as well as authored four publications regarding the program. Next, Mrs. Moral gave an update on the Ansi National Accrediting Board (ANAB) property & evidence on-site assessment that the client services/case management (CS/CM) division underwent the last several months. CS/CM finalized their assessment in December and now are waiting on the results. Then, she informed the board of a disclosure to the Texas Forensic Science Commission (TFSC) and ANAB concerning a CSI trainee that reproduced and presented a case form as the original record, despite initially stating they shredded the original record. The CSI trainee was terminated since this action violated the HFSC Code of Ethics. Even though this CSI trainee led other crime scenes, they were always supervised on scenes. Because of this requirement, the supervisor was able to catch this particular incident on time and question the CSI trainee about what happened. HPD and HCDAO were notified of the disclosure. Lastly, Mrs. Moral gave an overview on the 2023 testimony monitoring program. Each staff member testifying in court must be monitored at least once a year. For 2023, 96 % of the staff who testified in court were monitored. Out of the 77, only four weren't monitored; however, their testimonies have been requested from the court for review. In addition, a recorded total of 997 hours were spent in court, of which only 206 hours were actual testimonies. As mentioned previously, CSU has the largest percentage of time spent in court, followed by firearms and F.Bio. For the monitors, they spent 197 hours in court for 2023. Overall, there was a 65% increase in staff providing testimonies in court from last year. In comparison, HFSC received 2,735 subpoenas and only 232 actually testified in 2023. These numbers are expected to increase tremendously when the legal system adds three more courts in 2024.

**9. ADJOURNMENT:**

Director Hilder made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Director Baird seconded the motion. The meeting adjourned at 10:05 a.m.

The undersigned secretary of the board hereby certifies the following are true and correct minutes of the January 12, 2024 public meeting of the board.

By: Natalee Veazey  
Natalee Veazey  
Board Secretary