



# Houston Forensic Science Center, Inc.

Board of Directors

Public Meeting

~ Minutes ~

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Friday, May 09, 2025

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

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## 1. CALL TO ORDER:

At 9:00 a.m., Chairwoman Ellen Cohen 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, May 9, 2025, 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 May 6, 2025.

## 2. ROLL CALL:

The following board members were present in-person:

Chairwoman Ellen Cohen
Vice Chairwoman Joni Baird
Anna Vasquez
Sonia Corrales
Vicki Huff
Jessica Gooch

The following board members arrived late:

Asma Mirza (approx. 9:12am)
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The following board members were absent:

Jed Silverman
Jorn Yu
Philip Hilder

Chairwoman Cohen declared a quorum was present.

## 3. CHAIRWOMAN COHEN’S REPORT:

Chairwoman Cohen shared with the Board that she and Vice Chair Baird had the pleasure of touring the Vehicle Examination Building (VEB), which is operated (or managed) by HFSC. Vice Chair Baird agreed with Chairwoman Cohen’s comment, adding that it was wonderful to learn about another one of HFSC’s services. Both encouraged the directors to schedule a time to tour the VEB with Dr. Stout.

**4. PUBLIC COMMENT:**

Chairwoman Cohen gave members of the public an opportunity to address the Board. No members of the public addressed the Board.

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

Following a motion by Vice Chair Baird, seconded by Director Huff, the Board unanimously approved the March 14, 2025 meeting minutes.

**6. ANNUAL APPOINTMENT OF CORPORATE OFFICERS:**

Pursuant to the corporation’s bylaws, the Board appoints HFSC’s corporate officers annually. Chairwoman Cohen read the list of nominees prior to the roll call vote for each position.

President – Dr. Peter Stout
Vice President – Dr. Amy Castillo
Treasurer – David Leach
Board Secretary – Natalee Veazey

Director Huff made a motion to approve the list as presented. Director Corrales seconded the motion, and the Board unanimously approved the slate of corporate officers.

**7. ANNUAL VICE CHAIR SELECTION:**

Pursuant to the corporation’s bylaws and board resolution 2020-001, each year the Board selects a vice chair of the board. The vice chair shall hold said position until the next annual board meeting, at the same meeting the corporate officers are appointed. Chairwoman Cohen began the discussions with the nomination of Director Joni Baird, indicating that Director Baird was receptive to continuing her appointment and agreed to serve if the Board was also in favor of her selection.

Director Corrales made a motion to re-appoint Director Joni Baird as vice chairwoman for a term concluding at the May 2026 board meeting. Director Huff seconded the motion, and the Board unanimously approved the re-appointment.

**8. PRESIDENT AND CEO DR. PETER STOUT’S REPORT:**

To begin, Dr. Stout announced to the Board that he had t-shirts made for staff and had additional shirts available for the directors as well. He then went on to share the latest updates. Recently, in the Crime Scene Unit (CSU), the crime scene investigators (CSIs) have been training on the new Matterport equipment. Practice scans and competency testing are scheduled over the next four weeks before Matterport launches into production.

As for construction-related matters, staff designated for the 12<sup>th</sup> floor made a successful move during April, thanks to HFSC’s two LSS (Lean Six Sigma) members, Mrs. Wyatt and Mrs. Harris, along with HFSC volunteers. The basement construction is well underway with an estimated completion date of late summer this year. The loading dock should be completed by the end of this month. For the last update, Dr. Stout noted that two analysts have been signed off in Seized Drugs (SD). By August of 2025, four new DNA analysts will be signed off, in addition to another three analysts targeted to be signed off by early 2026. Next, he gave a status overview of the three major backlogs HFSC has been managing: Forensic Biology (F.Bio), SD, and Firearms (FA). F.Bio is making significant progress, thanks to the additional funds, while SD has made some progress. However, FA is still struggling to maintain their backlog.

For federal grant funding, the US Department of Justice rescinded \$811M in grant funding at the end of April. The majority of the grants were not forensics-related, but the Forensic Technology Center of May 9, 2025 Board Meeting Minutes – Houston Forensic Science Center, Inc

Excellence was cancelled, which existed under the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) and was a decades-long project for technology evaluation and forensics transitioning and training. The project was the single largest investment NIJ made in forensics, and it served many purposes to forensic labs across the nation. This particular grant will indirectly impact HFSC because it is the source of many training and educational resources. The grant that could directly affect HFSC is the Capacity Enhancement Backlog Reduction (CEBR). The grant solicitation has not been released for the upcoming funding cycle. There haven't been any signs of the CEBR grant being defunded; however, the delay in solicitation will create a major postponement in HFSC receiving the grant funds as it takes about a year for the applications to be processed and approved before releasing the funds. This will create problems for many labs due to them funding personnel with this grant, potentially resulting in another rise of sexual assault kits (SAKs) backlog in America. At the moment, HFSC should survive the CBER delay.

As for good news, US Representative Lizzie Fletcher selected HFSC's proposal for an FY26 (fiscal year) Community Funded Program submission that will provide resources to address legacy drug cases in storage that were never tested in labs. There are roughly 70,000 cases sitting in storage, where most of these cases accepted a plea agreement based on field test results. The challenge is that there have been studies proving there is a 3-5% false positive rate when using field tests. Therefore, there could be an estimated 3,000 cases where the defendant accepted a plea deal for a material that wasn't a controlled substance. Another difficulty is that it would cost millions to test all 70,000 cases, which most labs do not have the funding nor the time. Additionally, most of these cases are over 20-30 years old, so the materials have degraded over time. The proposal is to take a subset of the cases and conduct research on them, performing tests where possible. Based on the results, this will help the agencies make better educated decisions when processing the remaining cases, identifying cases that are considered no risks or high risks. Ultimately, storing drug cases for a long period of time has proven to be consequential by attracting rodents, posing as health hazards as the drugs become unstable over time, increasing maintenance and security expenses, and limiting storage space for future cases.

Next, Dr. Stout informed the Board of the latest Texas Legislative updates. Senator Huffman has two bills that will positively impact the forensics science community in Texas, if signed into law. SB1620 / HB5293 Texas Forensic Analyst Apprentice Pilot Program passed in the Senate and was heard in the House the week prior to the board meeting. The Public Safety committee passed the bill with favor, so it is now waiting for the House floor to vote. SB1660 relates to the retention and preservation of toxicological evidence of certain intoxication offenses, and it was voted favorably from the Senate Criminal Justice, of which recommended it to the Local/uncontested Calendar. Representative Cunningham filed HB2180, relating to a waiver of the preservation of evidence and the return of a seized weapon in a criminal case, and it was reported favorably from House Criminal Jurisprudence. The last senate bill has two different versions. SB3 (Senate version) seeks a near total ban on all cannabinoids except CBD and CBG, and this version passed the Senate. Should this version be signed into law, forensic labs would have an easier time processing controlled substances by performing qualitative testing to confirm whether the material has any trace of cannabinoids with exception to CBD and CBG. The only possible downside is this could increase the number of drug cases labs have to process. On the other hand, the House version of SB3 adjusted the bill to only ban hemp inhalable and regulate edibles and THC-infused beverages. This version passed out of House State Affairs. Regarding testing, forensic labs would need to quantitatively test materials for delta 9 THC, possibly making the process more complex, but processing vape products will be faster. Once again, Dr. Stout is not sure how this will impact the number of drug cases the labs will receive should this version be signed into law. Additionally, hemp materials would be regulated by TABC (Texas Alcohol Beverage Commission). There would be a fee structure for both licensing and selling the hemp product. Out of that revenue, 25% of the proceeds will be directed to funding forensic labs. Admittedly, having one of these versions be passed into law would be an improvement to the current legal situation that holds a lot of gray areas for the courts, law enforcement, and forensic labs.

Lastly, Dr. Stout provided more updates on the Qiagen issue. To help the directors have a visual understanding of the reagent issue, he brought a case of cartridges for demonstration purposes. Reviewing the three manufacturing issues, he explained that the cartridge's MTL buffer has an incorrect pH level, leading to a low or no DNA recovery when used in analyses. This was discovered by HFSC's Case Review Process and Quality's (QA) Blind Program. After visually inspecting the kits, it was found that in some of the kit lots, the MTL buffer and magnetic beads were both located in the wrong wells. Furthermore, HFSC's QA and F.Bio sections were able to narrow down the issue to only lot F after reviewing past data formed from the blinds and unintuitive samples; therefore, F.Bio could identify what range of cases may have been impacted. A case-by-case audit will be required to verify if a case was in fact impacted. Additionally, an in-depth review of past data confirmed that the previous lots used were not problematic, only the lot used in 2024 were manufactured incorrectly. Also, HFSC worked closely with one of their commercial outsourcing laboratories, Signature Science, by pausing all outsource testing to determine if their lab had any issues. The research concluded that Signature Science wasn't the root cause of the issue nor affected by the manufacturing issue; thus, additional quality assurance measures were implemented with them and the outsource testing resumed. Internally, HFSC evaluated other non-cartridge-based extraction platforms, changed the quality control process to use lower input of DNA to evaluate performance with low yield samples, established a pass/fail range based on quant value during quality control testing, and implemented a more stringent visual inspection of each cartridge needed prior to use. Legally, HFSC disclosed to Harris County District Attorney's Office and Fort Bend County District Attorney's Office the cases that may have been impacted and will work to coordinate the retesting of these cases. Overall, Qiagen's response to the manufacturing issue has been modest, unfortunately. It was noted that forensic labs across the nation will also have to audit and re-evaluate their impacted cases because Qiagen is one of the three major suppliers in the North American region.

**9. CONSIDER APPROVAL OF DR. STOUT'S PROPOSED ANNUAL CORPORATE PRIORITIES AND GOALS:**

Chairwoman Cohen reminded the Board that if the proposed annual corporate priorities and goals are approved, the goals will become part of Dr. Stout's evaluation for the FY 2026. She shared that at the next meeting, the company's performance data from the FY 2025 will be provided. Dr. Stout presented the proposed company goals, explaining how each category is evaluated and rated. First, all sections (technical and support) must complete their section production goal(s), working toward stakeholder needs and producing quality work. Second, all sections (technical and support) must complete their section quality goal(s), which will work toward improving reliability and robustness. Third, HFSC aims to maintain an average of 4.5 to 5 years company-wide employee tenure for the FY 2026. Lastly, HFSC will lay the foundation for a multi-year records management project. In year one, HFSC plans to train staff and develop processes to be followed in subsequent years. The documents, both electronic and paper, in the categories of Administrative Policies, Training Manuals, and Staff Meeting Notes will be located, aligned with the retention policy, and their disposition determined. Paper records will be digitized, if kept.

Following a motion by Director Corrales, seconded by Director Vasquez, the Board unanimously approved Dr. Stout's annual corporate priorities and goals for 2025-2026.

**10. QUALITY DIRECTOR JACKELINE MORAL'S REPORT:**

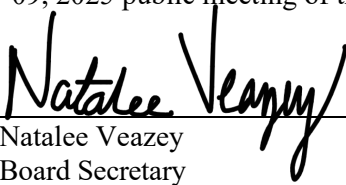
Mrs. Moral informed the Board that the data from the "Blind Testing in Firearms (2022)" paper was used in an article titled, "The Hawthorne effect in studies of firearm and toolmark examiners," which was published in April in the Journal of Forensic Sciences. Dr. Stout, Donna Eudaley (FA manager), and two QA specialists, Maddi Neuman and Callan Hundl, collaborated with Nick Scurich and Thomas Albright on their article. The article highlights how crucial it is to use blind testing methods in forensic labs to produce reliable evaluations of analyst performance and reduce the impact of observer bias and the Hawthorne effect. For the 2025 internal audit updates, multimedia had no nonconformance found but identified two

opportunities for improvement, toxicology had none, CSU had one nonconformance and identified six opportunities, FA had none but identified five opportunities, and latent prints had none but identified one opportunity. The opportunities for improvements are not necessarily nonconformances right now, but in the future, they can easily become one. It is best to remediate them sooner than later. The SD and F.Bio sections began their internal audit this month, so the results will be provided in the upcoming board meeting. During the week of July 7<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup>, an ANAB (ANSI National Accreditation Board) assessor will conduct an ANAB Surveillance Assessment without Witnessing, a virtual desk audit that focuses on seventeen accreditation requirements. The purpose of the document review is to audit the overall quality management system and ensure HFSC is complying with the seventeen subsets of accreditation requirements. A full audit for all seven disciplines will occur next year. As for the Texas Forensic Science Commission (TFSC) disclosures, Mrs. Moral stated that no further action was needed for the disclosure regarding the accidental upload of two blind quality control DNA samples into CODIS (Combined DNA Index System) as well for the disclosure regarding the CSI trainee who conducted unsupervised casework without authorization. TFSC was satisfied with the measures HFSC took to remedy these issues.

**11. ADJOURNMENT:**

Director Vasquez made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Vice Chair Baird seconded the motion. The meeting adjourned at 10:10am.

The undersigned secretary of the board hereby certifies the following are true and correct minutes of the May 09, 2025 public meeting of the board.

By:  \_\_\_\_\_  
Natalee Veazey  
Board Secretary