



Houston Forensic Science Center, Inc.

Board of Directors

Public Meeting

~ Minutes ~

Friday, September 12, 2025

www.hfsctx.gov

1. CALL TO ORDER:

At 9:03 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, September 12, 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 business 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 September 8, 2025.

2. ROLL CALL:

The following board members were present in-person:

Chairwoman Ellen Cohen
Vice Chairwoman Joni Baird
Jorn Yu
Sonia Corrales
Vicki Huff
Jessica Gooch

The following board members arrived late:

Asma Mirza (approx. 9:09am)

The following board members were absent:

Jed Silverman
Anna Vasquez
Philip Hilder

Chairwoman Cohen declared a quorum was present.

3. CHAIRWOMAN COHEN’S REPORT:

Chair Cohen shared with the Board that Council Member Peck and Mayor John Whitmire bestowed upon Dr. Peter Stout and Dr. Amy Castillo a Proclamation in honor of their ten years of service to HFSC. After sharing some comments about the proclamation presentation at the city council meeting, Chair Cohen ended her report by reminding the Board of the final 2025 board meeting date, which is to be held on November 14th. It is expected that the final meeting will include budgetary agenda items.

4. PUBLIC COMMENT:

Chair 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 July 28, 2025 meeting minutes.

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

To begin, Dr. Stout provided updates on HFSC facility construction projects, which are making great progress. The loading dock project is complete, and access permissions are being determined. As for the basement projects, construction has started now that permits are complete. It should be completed by the end of September. Regarding equipment installation, the electrical work is in progress for the LC-QTOF installation in the Seized Drugs (SD) and Toxicology (TOX) labs. Next, he gave an overview of the latest backlog metrics for Forensic Biology (F.Bio), Firearms (FA), and SD. F.Bio is slowly recovering from the effects of the Qiagen manufacturing error that occurred earlier this year. FA's backlog is continuing to rise steadily. With the new trainees signed off to complete case work, SD is starting to make progress on reducing its backlog.

Dr. Stout then turned to his performance evaluation and reminded the Board of the company-wide performance ratings for the 2025 fiscal year (July 1, 2024 – June 30, 2025), of which the company met and exceeded three out of four organization-wide goals. All fourteen sections completed 80% of monthly one-on-one meetings while five of those sections exceeded the goal. All sections completed their respective production goal(s) where they work towards stakeholder needs and producing quality work. Third, the company maintained a voluntary turnover rate of 9%, exceeding the proposed 11-13% rate. For the fourth goal, the company achieved the goal but did not exceed it due to one section unable to achieve their quality goal(s) of working toward improving reliability and robustness.

Continuing, Dr. Stout gave a brief history lesson on how the FA backlog became problematic. Originally, the Harris County courts' backlog was created in 2017 when Hurricane Harvey destroyed some of the courthouses and repairs had to be made, increasing turnaround time to process court hearings. The backlog was further worsened when COVID caused the court system to minimize operations in 2020, halting subpoenas for HFSC staff to testify. When the courts resumed full operation in 2022, their turnaround time had increased substantially. Additionally, subpoenas sent from the Harris County District Attorney's Office (HCDAO) increased by 84% above pre-pandemic numbers. Using a graph to support his argument, Dr. Stout pointed out that in the years 2015 to 2017, cases took about 24 months to reach trial. During this period, FA's turnaround rate to complete a case was 30 days while for SD, it took seven days. HFSC received about 2,000-2500 subpoenas per year at that time. Hurricane Harvey followed in 2017, causing the courts to become further backlogged, and their turnaround time rose to 34 months. Even at this point, FA and SDs' turnaround times were remaining steady, as well as the subpoena demand. However, HFSC started to see a higher demand for cases needing FA work; thus, HFSC began discussing with the City of Houston (COH) about concerns and requesting more funds to expand capacity in FA, especially when the training period for new FA examiners takes approximately two years. As predicted, FA's turnaround time started rising in 2020.

In 2022, HCDAO was experiencing a high turnover rate, which led to more inexperienced assistant district attorneys (ADAs) who possessed little experience with handling forensic evidence that requires nuances and expansive knowledge. Due to the lack of knowledge, the HFSC staff dedicated more time to training ADAs on how to appropriately request evidence testing, followed by how to understand the test results in order to submit the appropriate forensic evidence for a case trial. Concurrently, the ADAs' lack of experience also led to more demands for last-minute expedited testing requests.

Likewise, the demand for retesting rose and the prosecutors navigated the challenge of admitting evidence analyzed by former HFSC staff. Additionally, the ADAs struggled to manage witnesses scheduling, leaving analysts stuck at court to wait for hours before either testifying or being dismissed. Overall, the wasted hours could have been spent on analyzing cases. During this time, HFSC staff testified for 2017-2018 cases, not including homicide cases. By 2023, FA's turnaround time was nine months while SD's turnaround time was roughly four months, and the subpoena demand rose considerably. As for the courts' turnaround time, it rose to 45 months. While HFSC's backlogs do impact the courts' backlog, the court backlog has more influence on HFSC's backlogs. HFSC was not the primary reason for the courts' backlog situation.

At the end of 2023, more than 56% of subpoenas were for cases that occurred in 2021 or earlier. Dr. Stout showcased charts that highlighted each forensic discipline's turnaround time pre-pandemic, post-pandemic, and current (2025) with notes on how additional funding assisted each section over time. The final chart was a comparison overview of HFSC's budget request vs. approved by COH. Real significant progress in gaining more funds from COH occurred under Mayor Whitmire's term. Revisiting the FA backlog, Dr. Stout displayed a projected vs actual backlog chart, explaining that because HFSC pushed more resources from other disciplines towards FA, HFSC was able to mitigate FA's backlog. While the current backlog is not at the predicted level of 700 backlogged requests, reducing it will take years. Over time, the FA examination requests have become increasingly complex, prolonging the turnaround time to complete a case.

Joining the discussion, Dr. Amy Castillo, COO, added that FA currently has four examiner trainees and five full-time, experienced examiners, three of whom must be pulled away from their casework to assist with the training of new examiners. Concurrently, there are also four NIBIN technicians in training. Thankfully, COH did provide extra funds for the new fiscal year, which will allow the FA section to hire external trainers to assist with training. Soon, five more positions will be posted for hiring. Ideally, experienced examiners are preferred, but when Texas only has 72 trained FA examiners, it's hard to convince them to move to Houston and work for HFSC. This causes HFSC to hire fresh college graduates. Unfortunately, it is not common for these college graduates to have any training in the field of FA examination prior to starting at HFSC. Dr. Castillo went into detail about why the training takes two years to complete after the Board inquired as to why it takes so long. It is important to remember that this is a nationwide recruiting issue, not just for HFSC. The demand for FA examiners is large, but there aren't enough examiners to satisfy the demand.

For the Texas Legislative update, Governor Abbott signed an executive order on THC and cannabis, which was released on the same day as this board meeting. Based on a quick review, it appears the law regarding THC is still murky, as usual. HFSC will fully research the new order to better understand it and learn how it will impact SD's marijuana testing, which has become a complicated and complex process from the lack of clearly defined THC laws over the last six years. To demonstrate this, Dr. Stout pointed out that in 2019, SD's turnaround time stood at seven days. Now, the turnaround time has increased to 173 days, due to the increased difficulty in marijuana testing. Additionally, the training has become more laborious, and testing has become more expensive. On a positive note, the Texas Forensic Analyst Apprenticeship pilot program is underway in the planning stage with Texas Forensic Science Commission (TFSC) and the community, such as prosecutors, crime labs, and law enforcement agencies. The pilot program has enough funding to accept eighteen apprentices statewide, targeting F.Bio, FA, SD, and TOX as the most urgent disciplines that need more analysts. Dr. Stout predicts the planning will take at least twelve months, of which Dr. Stout will be involved.

7. CONSIDER APPROVAL OF A RENEWAL OF AN INTERLOCAL AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE CORPORATION AND TARRANT COUNTY, TEXAS, MEDICAL EXAMINER'S OFFICE:

This agenda item was postponed per the request of General Counsel, Ms. Akilah Mance.

8. QUALITY DIRECTOR JACKELINE MORAL'S REPORT:

Mrs. Moral informed the Board of the Blind Quality Control Program's ten-year anniversary. The program involved six forensic disciplines with roughly 5,000 hours put into the program's efforts for the evidence creation alone. A total of 4,078 blind cases were submitted for analysis to monitor the sections' standard operating procedures (SOPs), as well as analysts' performance and competence. Not only has the program proven to be effective in tracking defects for in-house processes, but it has also proven to be useful in confirming manufacturing defects, such as the Qiagen issue from earlier this year. Next, HFSC had its 2025 American National Surveillance Institute (ANSI) National Accreditation Board (ANAB) Surveillance Assessment without Witnessing during the week of July 7th – 11th, which was a virtual document review focusing on seventeen accreditation requirements regarding the overall HFSC quality management system. As a result, no nonconformances were found. Additionally, the CS/CM internal audit was completed during the week of August 11th – 14th in order to ensure the division is conforming to the ANAB property and evidence requirements, also resulting in no nonconformances found. However, six recommendations were noted for possible improvement. In October, the Safety and Security internal audit is scheduled for the week of the 20th.

Lastly, a disclosure was submitted to TFSC, which resulted in the finding of no further action needed, as the issue was deemed to be satisfactorily handled. To summarize the disclosure, an internal review determined that a Crime Scene Investigator (CSI) did not take contemporaneous notes when processing a vehicle, as required by HFSC policy. Instead, details were added to the relevant documents at a later time without dates and initials being marked to document a chronological timeline of when the notes were added. When confronted, the CSI denied the allegation despite the evidence, causing the CSI to be terminated for dishonesty and lack of candor. A Brady (*Brady v. Maryland*) notice was provided to the attorneys associated with the impacted cases, so they are aware of the issue. For the second TFSC disclosure, an outsourcing forensic biology laboratory that processes sexual assault kits for HFSC, disclosed that one of their intake technicians had a higher documentation error rate than others. Once the outsourcing laboratory identified this particular intake technician as the root cause of the errors, action was taken to review the kits at the outsourcing laboratory, and the vendor offered to review the kits that were back in HFSC's custody.

9. EXECUTIVE SESSION TO CONDUCT DR. STOUT'S ANNUAL EVALUATION:

At this time, the HFSC board of directors proceeded into a closed meeting, also known as an executive session, as permitted by the Texas Open Meeting Act (Texas Government Code Sections 551.071), to discuss Dr. Stout's annual evaluation. Chair Cohen closed the open meeting at 9:58am, then convened the executive session at 10:49am.

10. CONSIDER APPROVAL OF DR. STOUT'S ANNUAL EVALUATION:

The Board considered two motions related to the executive session.

The motion to approve a three and half percent increase in Dr. Stout's salary, effective on the first day of the next HFSC pay period, was made by Vice Chair Baird, seconded by Director Huff. The Board unanimously approved Dr. Stout's salary increase. The directors made remarks about Dr. Stout's job performance and thanked him for his service.

Vice Chair Baird made a motion to approve the following four performance objectives for Dr. Stout during the 2025-2026 review period: continue to expand HFSC's visibility statewide and nationally, including continuing to expand HFSC and its leaders' visibility on a local level; continue to work with TFSC and state universities on the Texas Forensic Analyst Apprenticeship pilot program; continue to expand the Board's engagement with external stakeholders, government officials, and community members; and lastly, continue to improve the marketing and communication strategies for the organization. Director Corrales seconded the motion, and the Board unanimously approved the performance objectives for Dr. Stout.

11. ADJOURNMENT:

Director Corrales made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Director Yu seconded the motion. The meeting adjourned at 10:53am.

The undersigned secretary of the board hereby certifies the following are true and correct minutes of the September 12, 2025 public meeting of the board.

By: Natalee Veazey Haley
Natalee Veazey Haley
Board Secretary