



September 29, 2020

Texas House of Representatives  
Committee on Appropriations  
Article I, IV, & V

Dear Chairman Capriglione and Members of the House Appropriations Committee,

On behalf of the Houston Forensic Science Center (HFSC), the Mayor's Office of the City of Houston is pleased to offer the following statements on "Interim Charge 3: Monitor use of state funding to increase forensic testing and reduce the sexual assault kit backlog." The following represents testimony from the HFSC related to the interim charge:

The Houston Forensic Science Center, the crime laboratory that provides services to the City of Houston and its police department, does not receive state funding for DNA analysis or any other service. However, it is unique in its organizational and funding structure and may provide the committee with unique insight into how disruptive the pandemic has been to one of a region's most essential functions.

Like every industry, the global COVID-19 pandemic has had broad impacts on the forensic community and crime laboratories statewide. Some of the impacts have been the same or similar and others are unique to each laboratory, their setup and how they receive their funding.

Following are a few items that have created significant issues for the crime laboratory since March:

*Protecting staff and operations*

The crime laboratory is an essential city and county function that provides information crucial to the justice system from the moment of investigation and through trial. It quickly became clear that in order to protect the operation and keep it functioning through the pandemic, HFSC had to first and foremost protect the staff and their families from infection.

To do this, HFSC had to reduce onsite presence to allow for greater social distancing. HFSC created two teams in all sections except the crime scene unit. The teams rotate between working in the laboratory and working from home. This has helped improve physical distancing in the facility but impacts production, including in the forensic biology/DNA section, which processes sexual assault evidence kits (SAKs). HFSC also provides weekly COVID-19 testing for staff, funded by federal CARES Act dollars.

#### *Limited IT resources to allow for network security when working offsite*

Allowing more staff to work from home is the easiest and most direct way to protect them from infection. However, to do so HFSC also has to guarantee the safety of its network, which is full of sensitive information and subject to standards set by the FBI under the Criminal Justice Information Services (CJIS.) HFSC has spent months seeking funding, largely from federal CARES dollars given to the City of Houston, to improve IT security and allow staff to do more work remotely. It has taken months to simply put laptops and webcams in the hands of the 200-member staff. It will take several more to properly secure HFSC's network and create paperless workflows in all disciplines to make remote work truly effective and efficient.

#### *Requests for service have increased in several disciplines, including forensic biology/DNA*

As HFSC has worked to decrease onsite staff numbers to protect staff, crime has continued - and in some areas increased. Requests for service have decreased in seized drugs, and to a far smaller extent, in toxicology. However, the crime scene unit has seen a pronounced, 30-plus percent increase in requests since the start of the year as homicides have increased.

This, of course, has also led to an increase in DNA requests. HFSC has more than 900 backlogged SAKs and is using federal dollars to use the services of two commercial laboratories to help eliminate the backlog. HFSC does not receive state dollars to help with this backlog, though in reality it impacts other parts of the state since a delay in uploads to the DNA database leads to a delay in potential hits and can impact investigations across jurisdictions. Having fewer people onsite has slowed down the attempt to eliminate the backlog.

#### *Crime Scene Unit*

HFSC's 28-member crime scene unit, like all in the state, operates 24/7 and is most vulnerable to virus infection due to its staff's contact with broad swaths of the public. At the same time as it has contended with numerous staff members testing positive for the virus, forcing them to quarantine for weeks at a time and further straining resources. Houston has seen an increase in homicides, as have the other 10 largest metro areas in the United States. This has taken a psychological and physical toll on the unit and raises the possibility that at some point they will not have the manpower to respond to all of Houston's needs.