D88 "One Giant Leap for Houston:" Shifting Paradigms for Forensic Services Operating Under the Umbrella of Police Management

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The goals of this presentation are to provide a history of the Houston Police Department Crime Lab and Identification Division and an overview of lessons learned, to explain the transformative progress, and to outline a novel model of forensic operation put into practice.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing a set of clear and concise strategic steps that can be used in addressing the closure of a forensic unit, including how to regain the confidence of both a concerned public and the criminal justice system as a whole, and by setting in motion a novel model for administering a forensic operation based on the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) Report, *Strengthening Forensic Science in the United States: A Path Forward*.

Historically, the Houston Police Department (HPD) Crime Lab, like many other forensic operations across the nation, has had its share of forensic and economic challenges. After a series of investigative reports by a local TV station in 2002, the DNA unit closed its operation. Soon after, and with full cooperation from the lab and HPD, a full-scale review and assessment of the entire operation by an independent investigative team took place, lasting nearly two years, at a cost to Houston taxpayers well in excess of five million dollars. Several root causes in the historical crime lab were identified, from which a comprehensive final report and set of recommendations were produced. Four central themes emerged from these reports and systematic corrective action was taken by HPD.

Over the past ten years, there has been significant progress in the forensic operation while under the direction and control of the Houston Police Department. The City of Houston has undertaken significant expense and effort to transform the HPD Crime Lab and Identification Division. In 2005, the lab became accredited in Controlled Substances, Biology, Trace, Firearms, Questioned Documents, and Toxicology by the American Society of Crime Lab Directors-Laboratory Accreditation Board (ASCLD-LAB). In 2006, the DNA unit became fully operational and accredited. In 2012, the Latent Print facility was completely renovated into a state-of-the-art facility in preparation for ISO 17025 accreditation. Recently, units such as those housing crime scene and digital forensic investigators were brought under the umbrella of forensic services.

A comprehensive and rigorous quality assurance program was implemented. Quality of staffing has been dramatically improved with emphasis on experience, certifications and educational credentials. Managers have been recruited with experience in laboratory management and expertise in forensic science. Rigorous training requirements have been imposed.

According to national reports, including the NAS Report, there is a need to remove public forensic labs from administrative control of law enforcement agencies or prosecutor's offices. An informal survey indicates that few public crime labs are outside the administrative control of law enforcement agencies or prosecutor's offices. In keeping pace with this recommendation, the city of Houston sought an innovative model of ensuring independence of their forensic operation from law enforcement and prosecutorial influence by establishing local government cooperation. This presentation will summarize the effort to make this vision to develop a model forensic operation a reality in Houston, Texas, and how it is structured with strong governance through a board of directors, technical advisory group, and an executive director. Finally, a summary of the progress made thus far will be presented, closing with the current development of a plan for a new forensic science center.

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