



E17 Certification of Forensic Examiners in Texas

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand: (1) the role of the Texas Forensic Science Commission (TFSC) with respect to the strategic advancement of forensic science; (2) the extent to which examiners in Texas were certified among participating laboratories; and, (3) efforts to address challenges associated with certification efforts.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by raising awareness concerning the prevalence of certification among forensic examiners as well as the practical challenges and impediments to examiner certification that currently exist.

The mission of the TFSC is to strengthen the use of forensic science in criminal investigations and courts by developing a process for reporting professional negligence or misconduct, investigating allegations of professional negligence or misconduct, promoting the development of professional standards and training, and recommending legislative improvements. In 2012, the TFSC sponsored an event entitled, "Strengthening Forensic Science in Texas: Moving Forward." A diverse group of forensic stakeholders was invited to discuss challenges and improvements that were broadly based upon the 2009 National Academy of Sciences Report, *Strengthening Forensic Science in the United States: A Path Forward*. As a follow-up to the Texas roundtables, the TFSC surveyed publicly funded accredited laboratories to determine the extent to which forensic examiners in Texas were certified, and to better understand the challenges related to certification efforts.

A total of 489 forensic examiners were represented in 22 publicly funded laboratories at the state (59%), county (23%), and city (18%) levels. Controlled substances (22%), forensic biology/DNA (17%), alcohol toxicology (15%), and firearms/tool marks (15%) were the most common disciplines or sections within the laboratory population, representing the largest numbers of examiners (167, 123, and 49, respectively). None of the publicly funded laboratories reported having sufficient examiners to maintain a 30-day turnaround in all disciplines in which they were accredited. The number of additional examiners needed to maintain a 30-day turnaround totaled 95 and ranged from 1 to 42 per organization. This represents a significant increase in scientific personnel of almost 20%. Of the 489 examiners, a total of 63 (13%) were certified. Two laboratories did not report certification by forensic discipline, but among the remaining 20 laboratories, the disciplines with the highest rates of certification were latent prints (21%) and firearms (16%). Certification rates among examiners in the most common disciplines, controlled substances and forensic biology/DNA, were 4% and 5%, respectively. The American Board of Criminalistics (ABC), the Association of Firearm and Tool Mark Examiners (AFTE), the International Association for Identification (IAI), and the American Board of Forensic Toxicologists (ABFT) were the most common certifying bodies. Support for certification among the forensic laboratory leadership was evidenced by the fact that 50% of the participating organizations already offered some form of incentive for examiners to become certified. Most of the laboratories support certification or view it as inevitable, but also recognize the formidable challenges associated with this effort in terms of funding, training resources, and personnel.

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