



B84 No Lab, No Plea ... Eliminating a Controlled Substances Backlog

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After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand the testing guidelines implemented and the tools used to clear a backlog and maintain a turnaround time of 30 days or less. Attendees will also comprehend how to apply these tools in their own jurisdictions.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing guidance on implementing managed processes, as well as testing guidelines that aid in the reduction of controlled substance backlogs. The Houston Forensic Science Center (HFSC) will share the lessons learned from its successful process in an effort to assist other jurisdictions in creatively managing their resources so they too can clear backlogs and maintain incoming caseloads.

Much attention has been paid to new legislation spreading across the United States regarding mandatory testing of sexual assault kits; however, it is often overlooked that in the controlled substance community, it has long been common practice for all seized drugs to undergo forensic testing, which creates a caseload of tens of thousands of cases. Due to limited resources, this often leads to large backlogs. Not only does this create strain within the lab, it also impacts the legal system. Also, drug convictions often move rapidly through the legal system as many defendants plead guilty rather than go through a lengthy trial. Recently, it has been discovered that some defendants have pleaded guilty to a drug charge prior to the seized substance being tested in the laboratory, only to find that subsequent testing showed no illegal substances were identified. This has led to approximately 200 drug case exonerations in Harris County, TX. The Houston-area legal system responded by instituting a “No Lab, No Plea” policy. While all involved agreed the policy was necessary, it did add pressure to clear the drug testing backlog and maintain a reduced turnaround time. Even though Federal funds are available for such upticks in work in the DNA area, the Controlled Substances Section had to find creative ways to increase capacity while reducing backlogs and turnaround times. By communicating with all stakeholders, HFSC’s Controlled Substances Section established guidelines that reduced the amount of testing being requested, simultaneously prioritizing cases moving rapidly through the legal system. The section also developed managed processing plans through a mini Lean Six Sigma assessment that increased efficiency and reduced turnaround times to fewer than 30 days.

In this presentation, the Controlled Substances Section will share some of its process development results to illustrate how to communicate with stakeholders and use available resources to clear backlogs and maintain a 30-day turnaround time.

Backlog, Controlled Substances, Process Management