



A103 Operational and Leadership Assessment During the Puerto Rico Forensic Science Project: How the American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors (ASCLD) Lab Directors, National Association of Attorneys General (NAAG) and Forensic Scientists Assisted the Puerto Rico Laboratory After Hurricane Maria

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the operational and logistical challenges a forensic laboratory may face after a massive natural disaster or significant economic catastrophe. Attendees will be asked to consider the “cracks” or risks in their own laboratories that may be exposed with a significant stressor such as a natural disaster or financial crisis. Attendees will take away some considerations when engaging in benevolent volunteerism as an individual or organization. Attendees will learn about the struggles of an amazing group of colleagues in Puerto Rico and an inspiring group of volunteers from the continental United States that have activated to make a difficult situation better for their colleagues.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: “Labs Helping Labs” is an initiative that needs to continue to grow. Forensics is a unique community where culturally colleagues want to help each other. It is a unique community because forensic science volunteers have a special skills set that must come from the trained experts in the forensic science community. As the number of natural disasters and the amount of political instability increases in the world, forensic scientists must be prepared to immediately deploy the necessary help to bolster the criminal justice services to impacted communities. Critical lessons learned from this project can provide a head start in emergency preparedness and volunteerism efforts all over the world.

In April 2018, ASCLD was asked by the National Association of Attorneys General (NAAG) to provide an operational needs assessment of the forensic science laboratory. The initial needs assessment included an evaluation of facility damage due to Hurricane Maria, instrument damage and other factors inhibiting forensic work, and backlogs existing before and after Hurricane Maria. After discussing the forensic science laboratory critical needs, meetings were held with federal government entities, Puerto Rican government officials, forensic laboratories around the country, and many forensic science instrument and service vendors to coordinate a response. The ASCLD President and the ASCLD Board determined resources the organization could provide and continued to partner with NAAG to determine the best method to provide resources to the Puerto Rico forensic science laboratory.

On-site fact-finding visits were conducted in April and October 2018 by the ASCLD President and the NAAG Director of Center for Ethics and Public Integrity. These visits consisted of visiting with the top leadership of the laboratory, leaders of each laboratory forensic science discipline, grant managers, facility managers, evidence technicians, financial and human resources managers, customers, and stakeholders to understand the scope of issues faced by the laboratory. Immediately evident were problems with the physical facility (e.g., sustainable power, air conditioning, security), broken instrumentation, a lack of personnel, a lack of training resources, and appropriate leadership. The laboratory was in financial crisis due to federal bankruptcy imposed upon the island and also the restructuring of the Puerto Rican government.

ASCLD and NAAG established top priorities, developed a Memorandum Of Understanding (MOU) with the Puerto Rican government, and identified resources to address the most urgent issues. In May 2018, ASCLD provided scholarships for three top Puerto Rico Forensic Science Bureau (FSB) leaders to attend the ASCLD annual symposium in Atlanta, GA. In January 2019, the majority of the ASCLD Board, along with other ASCLD members, traveled to Puerto Rico to provide assistance. ASCLD taught the renowned ASCLD Leadership Academy training at the lab, and approximately 30 FSB leaders graduated. ASCLD brought experts from every forensic science discipline, quality assurance professionals, and laboratory leaders from across the country to directly engage with each technical discipline. Experts were provided a specific mission for approximately the next week to research the issues facing each discipline. Additionally, ASCLD experts were asked to perform a root cause analysis of the existing issues. ASCLD experts provided recommendations for instrument, method, personnel, and process improvement in each discipline. ASCLD appointed a project leader for addressing each forensic science discipline, quality assurance, development of a new Laboratory Information Management System (LIMS), federal grant management, financial management and purchasing, and physical facilities.

ASCLD has continued to work with FSB leaders to make necessary operational improvements at the laboratory. ASCLD experts have continued to provide direct assistance to the laboratory in countless ways. Meetings have continued in-person and via teleconferences to provide expert advice, technical assistance, and information exchange. ASCLD has facilitated donations of instrumentation and equipment, coordinated casework and technical review assistance, provided analyst training, and assisted in identifying potential volunteer and affordable vendors that could provide necessary services. ASCLD will continue to provide essential assistance for the near future as part of a new initiative titled “Labs Helping Labs.”

This presentation—which we propose will be accompanied by sister presentations by our partners at the Forensics Sciences Board (FSB), NAAG, the American Board of Forensic Anthropology, and the American Society for Clinical Pathology—will address, among other things: (1) ASCLD involvement in the Puerto Rico FSB project; (2) operational challenges the laboratory had in recovering from a natural disaster and significant government bankruptcy; (3) challenges a volunteer initiative has in working with the federal government, state or territory government, and potential vendors. Lessons learned for labs helping labs in future emergencies; and (4) lessons learned through this massive humanitarian volunteer effort, including the importance of a robust MOU, establishing connections with government entities and politicians, effective coordination of benevolent donors and avoiding potential political conflicts, addressing funding challenges to support on-site volunteerism, establishing legitimacy with disaster recovery experts and organizations, bolstering leadership and management structure amid political and financial instability, developing trust with laboratory leaders and staff in challenging circumstances, and the considerations of benevolent volunteerism versus paid contract help.

Puerto Rico, Volunteer, Hurricane Recovery