



B158 Crime Scene Transformation: Helping Evidence Tell Its Story

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will have learned how to transition a crime scene unit from a classified operation to a civilian unit and the downstream benefits to the crime laboratory's forensic analysis.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by serving as a rubric for how to make the transition to and understand what efforts best serve the community, police department, inter-agency relationships, and other stakeholders. The discussion will include information about how the concept of a civilian and independent crime scene unit began, the efforts the City of Houston, the Houston Police Department, and other key stakeholders employed to make it a reality, and the belief that crime scene investigation is the face of forensics in the field and at the core of successful subsequent testing. The Houston Forensic Science Center (HFSC) has been nationally recognized for innovation and transparency in other forensic areas, but the crime scene unit's transformation has gone largely unnoticed. This presentation is aimed at sharing that unit's success and at educating others about the pros and cons of this transition.

Crime scene investigators are often those among the first, if not the first, to encounter evidence and the scene. As such, a unit's standard operating procedures impact not only what is identified as evidence, but how those items are collected, the level of potential contamination and/or loss, and whether the evidence is collected, preserved, handled, packaged, and identified in a manner that can potentially be used to further a criminal investigation. It is also where forensics comes into the most direct contact with law enforcement at a time when emotions are highest, a crime scene. As a result, transitioning from a classified to a civilian crime scene unit comes with trials and tribulations, and all aspects and phases must be considered, from the slow introduction of civilians into a unit that still has classified personnel, transferring those officers back to their law enforcement duties, and continuing to offer quality work while overcoming the obstacles.

The HFSC navigated all of this and more as it transitioned to a civilian crime scene unit. HFSC's successes, failures, and numerous challenges can now serve as an educational tool for others in the forensic community looking for ways to become more efficient and offer higher quality services to stakeholders. HFSC's Crime Scene Unit (CSU), like all other forensic disciplines in the agency, is now accredited by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) National Accreditation Board (ANAB) to International Organization for Standardization/International Electrotechnical Commission (ISO/IEC) 17025 standard. This unit has changed the perception of Crime Scene Investigators (CSIs) from mere "technicians" or "garbage collectors," as they were called before HFSC took over, to colleagues with skills and critical thought processes that are crucial to an investigation.

Cognitive Bias, Crime Scene Investigation, Evidence Handling