



## F4 Implementing Organization of Scientific Area Committees (OSAC) Standards at the Local Level: Lessons From Texas

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**Learning Overview:** After attending this presentation, attendees will have learned about efforts in Texas to implement OSAC standards in a variety of laboratory settings as well as the development of standards-related educational tools for lawyers and judges.

**Impact on the Forensic Science Community:** As OSAC nears the end of its sixth year of operations, we are seeing the fruits of several years and thousands of hours of labor. This presentation will impact the forensic science community by discussing successes and challenges in making the standards and guidelines work for laboratories with varying resource levels. The critical task of educating lawyers and judges on the significance and scope of OSAC work product will also be discussed.

Since its official inception in 2014, the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) Organization of Scientific Area Committees for Forensic Science (OSAC) has worked to advance the mission of strengthening forensic practice by facilitating the development of science-based standards through a formal Standard Developing Organization (SDO) process, evaluating existing standards published by SDOs for placement onto the OSAC Registry, and promoting the use of the OSAC Registry-approved standards throughout the forensic science community.

While this effort is widely embraced by forensic science service providers and stakeholders of the criminal justice system in theory, the “how to” of practical implementation is far more challenging. This is especially true considering accrediting bodies such as the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) National Accreditation Board (ANAB) and American Association for Laboratory Accreditation (A2LA) will not assess laboratories to OSAC standards unless and until the laboratories adopt those standards as part of their operating procedures.

Further complicating the effort is the fact that most criminal cases are prosecuted in state court. There is no national agency or regulatory body to act as the “owner” of the forensic science enterprise. This leaves state oversight bodies like the Texas Forensic Science Commission in the unique and enviable position of benefitting from the work product emerging from the OSAC and determining when and how specific expectations regarding the adoption of OSAC Registry documents should be established. In Texas, the Commission’s decisions with respect to OSAC implementation impact just under 100 laboratories, approximately half of which are physically located inside Texas and the other half physically located outside of Texas.

As OSAC nears the end of its sixth year of operations, we are seeing the fruits of several years and thousands of hours of labor. By September 30, 2020, there were 37 standards on the OSAC Registry of Approved Standards and, according to the most recent OSAC Standards Bulletin (September 2020), there are several hundred standards at some point in the OSAC or related SDO process.

With the list of OSAC Registry standards growing exponentially, the Texas Commission has begun a process of reviewing standards and guidelines and making recommendations with respect to laboratory adoption. The Commission’s initial focus is on encouraging a period of voluntary adoption before any mandates take effect. In encouraging voluntary adoption, the Commission recognizes not all laboratories have the same resources, and not all standards and guidelines are created equal. While some are obvious for adoption, others may be perceived by local forensic science service providers as going either “too far” or “not far enough,” depending upon the reader’s perspective.

What is critically important, however, is that the Texas Commission embraces the OSAC process overall while simultaneously listening to the needs of Texas laboratories and providing implementation resources to the extent possible. These resources are in the form of discipline-based committees that will review and provide observations to the Commission, assistance with gap analyses to assess where labs stand relative to published standards, and training and educational resources from members of the OSAC most closely involved in developing the standards. For some standards, it may also be the case that the Commission adds supplementary comments with respect to certain aspects of the documents that could be served by additional clarifying information the Commission believes important to ensuring appropriate adoption of sound scientific principles.

In addition to the state-based standards vetting process, the Commission is in the process of publishing the OSAC standard-adoption status of each publicly funded crime laboratory within its jurisdiction, as well as any privately funded laboratories (e.g., Bode, NMS Labs, Signature Science, and others) that perform casework in Texas and choose to be included in the list. This information provides the criminal justice community with an understanding of what to expect from laboratories in various disciplines. Finally, the Commission will offer virtual training for the Texas legal community on every standard reviewed and recommended for adoption. This will assist the ultimate end-user (the criminal justice system) with understanding the purpose and scope of each document.

Finally, the OSAC Quality Task Group has created a “How-to Guide” to help quality managers, senior management, and technical leaders with step-by-step tips for implementing standards, including language to add to methods manuals and quality assurance manuals. The [“How-to Guide” for standards implementation](#) is posted on the [OSAC website](#).

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### OSAC, Texas, Implementation