



AMERICAN ACADEMY OF FORENSIC SCIENCES

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NIJ NEEDS ASSESSMENT FOR CRIME LABS EXPOSES LACK OF ADEQUATE FUNDING

COLORADO SPRINGS (December 20, 2019) The American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS) applauds the release of the National Institute of Justice's (NIJ) *Needs Assessment of Forensic Laboratories and Medical Examiner/Coroner Offices*, which was released (<https://www.justice.gov/olp/page/file/1228306/download>). AAFS President J. Zeno Geradts, PhD, stated, "This study provides a much needed assessment of what is required to advance forensic science in the United States through adequate funding for personnel, training, infrastructure and equipment, quality management, and the special needs of medical examiner and coroner offices. It is no surprise to the community that sufficient and consistent funding for publicly funded forensic science service providers is needed and this report quantifies that. Just to keep up with evidence submissions driven by the increasing demands for forensic services, the study estimates that an additional \$640 million is needed annually for normal operations and an additional \$270 million for the current opioid crisis."

AAFS thanks Congress for its long-time support of forensic science and urges it to seriously consider this report when reauthorizing the Justice for All Act and the Paul Coverdell Forensic Science Improvement Grants Program. The Coverdell program is the only federal grant program to provide publicly funded forensic science service providers with financial support for personnel, laboratory operations, capacity enhancement, and accreditation, among other things. However, the funding levels have not been significant enough to ensure that laboratories can achieve full capacity and capability.

The support of Congress through the Coverdell program has helped public crime laboratories improve quality management through accreditation, and it is an example of the important impact Congress can have on ensuring justice in the United States. By 2014, nearly 99 percent of state-based laboratories were accredited, according to the report. As the report noted, this high percentage of accredited laboratories may explain why the number of exonerations related to forensic science has plummeted since the mid-1990s.

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The turnaround time for processing evidence is imperative in the search for and prosecution of perpetrators. The report revealed that between 2011 and 2017, each area of forensic analysis has seen a 60 percent increase in turnaround time, with some disciplines having even a more dramatic increase. More highly trained personnel, equipment, infrastructure, and research are needed to maintain current and future levels of requests for services and, concurrently, to reduce turnaround time. Increased funding for Coverdell program grants would help reduce backlogs and assist law enforcement in investigating criminal activity.

One of the greatest pending crises exists in the medicolegal death investigation services within the medical examiner and coroner systems. The opioid epidemic has revealed a national shortage of trained, board-certified forensic pathologists. Congress must continue to explore ways to recruit and retain qualified personnel to meet the increasing demands for death investigations.

Basic and applied research is necessary to enhance the validity of the underlying science and the reliability of the analyses. Sufficient, dedicated, and continuous funding is essential for practitioner-driven research in partnerships with universities and other research entities. AAFS agrees with the report, which states that NIJ is a leader in forensic science research, and it should partner with the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) and other agencies to develop a national research strategy.

This needs assessment is an important benchmark for the forensic science community and for Congress in developing a funding stream to assist publicly funded forensic service providers in enhancing and optimizing their operations to meet the needs and expectations of the criminal justice system and the public.

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About AAFS

The American Academy of Forensic Sciences is a multidisciplinary professional organization providing leadership to advance science and its application to the legal system. The objectives of the Academy are to promote professionalism, integrity, competency, and education, and to foster research, improve practice, and encourage collaboration in the forensic sciences.

Organized in 1948, AAFS serves a distinguished and diverse membership of more than 6,700 forensic-science professionals who are the focal point for public information when forensic-science issues are addressed in the public domain. AAFS publishes the internationally recognized Journal of Forensic Sciences. For more information, visit www.aafs.org.



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