



*American Academy of Forensic Sciences
American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors
International Association for Identification
National Association of Medical Examiners
Society of Forensic Toxicologists/ American Board of Forensic Toxicology*

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NEEDS ASSESSMENT OF FORENSIC SCIENCES

REQUEST

CFSO requests that an Operational Needs Assessment of the nation's forensic science service providers and Medical Examiner/Coroner (ME/C) offices be conducted triennially and be accompanied by a strategic plan from DOJ to implement recommendations.

BACKGROUND

Over the past twenty years forensic science has and continues to evolve, becoming increasingly more robust and discriminating. Its use to fight crime and exonerate those who are innocent has expanded tremendously. Forensic science is now routinely used in the courtroom, is expected by jurors, and has become a key part of the criminal justice system. The National Institute of Justice's *Needs Assessment of Forensic Laboratories and Medical Examiner/Coroner Offices* Report to Congress was the first attempt in determining the approximate cost to meet the current demand for services and the related costs of testimony by forensic service providers from public laboratories and medical examiners/coroner offices while ensuring valid and reliable results.

The report concludes there is not sufficient funding to process the ever-increasing amounts of forensic evidence in a timely manner. **The report states that the state, county, local and tribal crime laboratories including medical examiner/coroner offices have a \$640 million annual deficit for normal operations, but the increase of current opioid expenditures adds another \$270 million to that cost.**

Key needs that the report states are necessary for Forensic Laboratories and ME/C Offices to run more efficiently are as follows:

- Institutionalization of systems-based communications between forensic science service providers, their customers, and other stakeholders to better understand and calibrate expectations; track the status of a case as it is processed through the system; and inform evidence submissions, testing priorities, and laboratory decision-making.
- Sufficient and consistent funding and strategic planning to process increasing amounts of forensic evidence and to address fluctuations in evidence submissions driven by the supply of and demand for forensic services.
- Sufficient and consistent funding and strategic planning to address the impact of the opioid crisis on forensic laboratories and ME/C offices.
- Sufficient and consistent funding and strategic planning to address ME/C workforce and workload challenges, as variability in ME/C resources and access to qualified medicolegal death investigation services can result in the inequitable application of death investigations. The US has only 400-500 board-certified forensic pathologists practicing full-time, but it is estimated that the country needs as many as 2,000 in state, county, city, and tribal ME/C offices to be able to keep up with the ever-increasing workload.
- Sufficient and consistent funding for forensic practitioner training. Virtually all new employees, whether experienced analysts or recent graduates, require significant training to become eligible for casework. Medicolegal death investigation and forensic laboratory scientific personnel also have continuing education requirements for maintaining their licenses and certifications.

- Improvement in the personnel pipeline from education through hiring and training, particularly in disciplines that are facing critical personnel shortages. Analysis of a subset of publicly funded, accredited laboratories' data through 2017 estimated that county, city, and state laboratories nationwide would need more than 900 additional full-time employees to efficiently address current caseloads.
- Sufficient supply of graduates from academic programs who are prepared to seek and obtain employment in forensic science fields upon program completion. While graduates of forensic science programs tend to be prepared with scientific skills, they may lack the practical experience and critical thinking skills necessary to be ready to provide immediate support in the laboratory upon hiring. There is a need to bridge the gap between the goals of the academic programs and those of the forensic laboratories.
- Continued efforts to strengthen quality assurance measures, limit preventable nonconformities, and maintain a healthy workforce in the forensic sciences. These efforts can include supporting accreditation processes and hiring dedicated laboratory staff, such as a quality manager.
- Efforts to maintain a resilient forensic workforce. Efforts can include developing resources to address workforce stress and vicarious trauma associated with the forensic work environment. The stress from backlogs, unrealistic productivity expectations, and court testimony have been even further exacerbated by work disruptions, crime increases, and other COVID-19 and societal related criminal justice system stressors.

The needs assessment provides a remarkable opportunity for the federal government to make the investment necessary for forensic services in the United States to lead the world. Making this investment now will ensure that the needs of the criminal justice system are met, that the correct people are held responsible for their crimes, and that victims of crime are able to see justice in their cases.

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