

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Department of Forensic Sciences



Fiscal Year 2023 Performance Oversight Hearing

Testimony of
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Interim Director

Before the
Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety
The Honorable Brooke Pinto, Chairperson
Council of the District of Columbia

John A. Wilson Building
Room D
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9:30AM



Good morning, Chairperson Pinto, Council members, and staff of the Committee on the Judiciary & Public Safety. I am Dr. Francisco Diaz, the Interim Director of the Department of Forensic Sciences (DFS) and Chief Medical Officer for the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME). Thank you for inviting me to testify on behalf of the Honorable Mayor Muriel Bowser to discuss the fiscal year 2023 activities and accomplishments of the Department of Forensic Sciences.

I am pleased to report on the progress that DFS has made over the past year utilizing the resources provided by the Honorable Mayor Bowser in her efforts to provide safer streets for District residents and visitors. I value this opportunity to recognize DFS efforts to improve our operations, maintain our quality, engage our customers, build toward the future, and help create a safer, stronger DC.

The progress that has occurred has only been possible due to the Mayor's long-standing commitment to provide the resources that the Department needs, and the support of the Council. In addition to our state-of-the-art facility, DFS staff continue to work tirelessly to meet the needs of the District residents and restore trust with our stakeholders. Our laboratories and offices are filled with capable and dedicated scientists and staff who strive daily to deliver high-quality and reliable crime scene, forensic science, and public health services and supports. I would be remiss if I didn't pause to acknowledge the incredible and consistent efforts of the staff who have led their teams forward through the necessary improvements to achieve many of our substantial accomplishments and help make the residents in the District safer.

Now I will provide an overview of the accomplishments for each of our programs within DFS.

Under the leadership of the recently hired Chief Science Officer, Dr. Jennifer Love and Deputy Chief Science Officer and Interim Forensic Science Laboratory Director, Kristy Hopkinson, the Forensic Science Laboratory (FSL), which currently includes the Forensic Biology Unit (FBU), Forensic Chemistry Unit (FCU), Latent Fingerprint Unit (LFU), and Forensic Intelligence Unit (FIU), the FBU successfully outsourced 271 Physical Evidence Recovery Kits (formally known as Sexual Assault Kits) and over 955 requests for testing, with an average turnaround of 69 days. The LFU outsourced approximately 784 latent print analysis requests, with an average turnaround of 66 days. The Forensic Chemistry Unit (FCU) outsourced 90 cases with an average turnaround of less than 60 days. Collectively, the Forensic Intelligence Unit (FIU) received and processed over 3,500 forensic requests for testing from stakeholders.

Despite the pause of in-house forensic testing due to the division's accreditation status, the Forensic Science Laboratory (FSL) has been hard at work revamping its processes, procedures, and protocols in preparation for application of re-accreditation, while continuing to support the District's criminal justice system through continuation of casework processing via outsourcing. In hiring and working directly with the consulting firm Forensic, Analysis, Consulting, and Training, better known as FACT, as well as Evolve Forensics, the FSL and Quality teams have successfully implemented several recommendations issued in the December 2021 SNA International report, such as:

- Securing the services of experts in ISO/IEC 17025 accreditation requirements to conduct an independent assessment for the Latent Fingerprints Unit (Evolve Forensics);
- Updating various policies and procedures surrounding evidence handling, document retention, and document management in line with regulatory guideline and accrediting body requirements;
- Completing a management series offered by the George Washington University;

- Establishing an online complaint form for our customers and stakeholders.

As a result of these efforts, the FSL was deemed prepared to submit the application for re-accreditation for the Forensic Biology Unit (FBU) and Forensic Chemistry Unit (FCU), with the external assessment taking place from December 4-6, 2023. And on December 22, 2023, we received news from the ANSI National Accreditation Board (ANAB) that this assessment resulted in the identification of zero non-conformities and one recommendation, restoring the accredited status of the FBU and FCU.

In addition to the outstanding news of the restored accreditation status of these two units, the FSL has achieved several notable accomplishments throughout FY23, including:

- Two International Association of Identification (IAI) certified latent scientists in the Latent Fingerprint Unit (LFU),
- Approval status of an ANAB-qualified forensic assessor within the FBU team, and
- Recent issuance of the FBU's first Combined DNA Index System (CODIS) match notification reflecting the ANAB accreditation symbol.

Under the leadership of Alesia Wheeler-Moore, the Crime Scene Sciences (CSS) Division continues to perform many other critical and key functions in service to District residents and visitors. In response to crime within the District of Columbia, CSS has been hard at work responding to service requests for processing of crime scenes. In FY23, the Crime Scene Sciences Unit (CSSU) processed 12,251 crime scenes, with the Central Evidence Unit (CEU) receiving 106,759 pieces of evidence for intake, storage, and maintenance. CSS members have also participated in various trainings to enhance current skills, as well as acquire new skills in the field of crime scene processing by attending courses in areas such as advanced photography, latent print chemical processing, and shooting reconstruction.

In addition to the CSS Team's unwavering commitment to responding to and processing crime scenes expeditiously, the division continues to acquire the most advanced technology and equipment to enhance and expedite this critical work. For instance, the purchase of Leica 3D laser scanners and Niko high-definition mirrorless cameras have assisted in producing high-level accuracy of crime scene documentation, adhering to best practices in the field of crime scene processing and providing our partners and stakeholders with a quality experience processing evidence on the scene of crime.

The DFS Public Health Laboratory (PHL), led by Director Dr. Jocelyn Hauser, conducts testing of public health significance, and extends locally important testing provided at the federal level by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). PHL provides clinical diagnostic testing, disease surveillance, emergency response support, applied research, laboratory training, and other essential services through its five units: the Accessioning Unit (ASU), Microbiology Unit (MBU), Clinical Chemistry Unit (CTU), Immunology Virology Unit (IVU), and Molecular Diagnostic Unit (MDU). In FY23, PHL conducted a total of 25,718 tests for public health samples received, including influenza subtyping, rabies testing, arbovirus screening, testing for foodborne outbreaks, COVID-19, and Monkeypox.

In FY23, PHL, once again, successfully demonstrated compliance with the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services' Clinical Laboratory Improvement Amendments (CLIA) regulatory guidelines, as well as CDC's Division of Select Agents and Toxins (DSAT). Additionally, PHL successfully

implemented wastewater processing in all eight wards in the District, developing a sequencing process for detecting SARS-CoV2 and other pathogens in wastewater. PHL also continued to expand upon its focus in research development and training in the public health field by collaborating with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Technical Assistance Program (TAP) to implement a cross-training program to enhance and diversify the skills of PHL staff, increasing the division's readiness to adequately respond to surges in public health outbreaks.

In FY23, the Legal Team received and handled 608 discovery requests. They also received and responded to 16 Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, all of which were answered within the 15-day turnaround time. The Legal Team also oversaw the creation and approval of 57 MOA/MOUs between the Department and other agencies.

Through targeted recruitment, the agency was able to achieve a 21% vacancy rate, onboarding 35 new employees in FY23, allowing increased efficiencies in providing critical forensic and public health services. Currently, the agency vacancy rate is 19%. Specifically, the vacancy rate reduction has allowed PHL to expand capabilities in Bioterrorism, COVID-19, Monkeypox, and testing of other viral outbreaks and CSS to see its staffing increase to 96% capacity for responding to and collecting evidence from crime scenes. Additionally, FSL made critical new hires, such as the onboarding of the new Chief Science Officer and Quality Assurance Manager to assist in the efforts of gaining re-accreditation and bringing forensic testing and analysis services back online to help in the resolution of criminal cases impacting DC residents and visitors.

In FY23, the Information Technology (IT) Team was instrumental in ensuring the continuity of services, system improvements and optimization for the professional and scientific functions within DFS. Under the direction of our Chief Information Officer, our IT Team continues its diligent work on customizations and upgrades to various agency systems, such as the Laboratory Information Management System (LIMS), which is the central repository for tracking of criminal casework and evidence received and processed by the agency. Through hiring and working closely with our vendor SNA International, the IT Team has been steadfast in reaching established goals for the LIMS project. In addition to managing major technological projects, the IT Team has been instrumental in ensuring continuity of daily technical needs for the agency, handling over 1,200 service requests in FY23.

Under the management of the Chief Operating Officer, the Operations Team performs several critical functions, including budget management, contracts and procurement, performance management oversight and coordination, and ensuring the health and safety of all staff. In FY23, our team processed 159 procurement requisitions and 386 purchase card (PCard) transactions while ensuring we met the District's Department of Small & Local Business Development (DSLBD) compliance requirements. In collaboration with the Department of General Services, the operations team coordinates all facilities maintenance tasks and projects. Our health and safety team provided oversight, guidance, and training to ensure the agency remains compliant with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), and all building related regulations.

I could not be prouder of the work DFS has done under my leadership. I am confident DFS will deliver even greater returns for the people of District. I would like to acknowledge Mayor Bowser, City Administrator Donahue, and Deputy Mayor Appiah, and their staff for the continuous and generous support of DFS as we strive to achieve the Mayor's vision of a safer, stronger DC. I would also like to recognize our public safety partners who support DFS. I am thankful for the DFS team

who work within the offices and laboratories of DFS, whose stronger science has led to safer streets for all our friends and neighbors in the District of Columbia. In closing, I would like to thank you for your leadership and support. We appreciate the opportunity to share our achievements. This concludes my testimony. I welcome your questions.