



Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences

PRESS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Harris County Unveils New Forensic Genetics Laboratory

***Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences expands to meet
the growing needs of a growing community***

One by one, nearly 100 forensic analysts, scientists, elected officials, invited guests and Harris County employees stepped past the red ribbon that lay cut at the entrance as they crossed the threshold of the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences' new Forensic Genetics Laboratory. With bright eyes and excited smiles, they were the first to view the newly constructed lab following a Ribbon Cutting ceremony held Wednesday, Oct. 31.

"A place where science serves justice..." Those were the words thoughtfully articulated at the ceremony by Luis A. Sanchez, M.D., executive director of the Institute of Forensic Sciences and Harris County's chief medical examiner.

"This state-of-the art laboratory stands as a monument and testimony to the high value Harris County places on the independence of science, sound scientific evidence, and impartiality in the pursuit of criminal justice," Dr. Sanchez added.

The newly converted 15,000-square-foot facility, formerly the train bay for a Nabisco baking plant, is located in the Texas Medical Center's John P. McGovern Building and now houses the state-of-the art Forensic Genetics Laboratory. The laboratory will soon move from its existing location within the Institutes' main, 30-year-old building to its new home and begin full operation after the first of the year.

As one of many forensic disciplines of the Institute, the Forensic Genetics Laboratory is responsible for analyzing biological fluids and tissues to obtain DNA profiles that may link evidence found at crime scenes to individuals. Currently the laboratory employs 41 highly qualified staff including DNA lab analysts, the Trace/DNA Collection Team and other DNA specialists and support staff. All hold degrees with 26 holding advanced degrees related to science and forensic genetics – 20 hold Master of Science degrees and six hold doctorate degrees. Fifteen laboratory staff members are certified by the American Board of Criminalists.

A Story of Promises Kept

In 2003, when Dr. Sanchez assumed the office of the chief medical examiner, he and the management of the Institute of Forensic Sciences made a promise to the citizens of Harris County – to provide the highest quality of forensic services in an unbiased and timely manner with uncompromised integrity.

Today, the Forensic Genetics Laboratory serves 37 agencies within Harris County and completes an average of nearly 3,400 cases each year while maintaining no backlog of unprocessed cases.

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“Our output of cases makes us one of the most productive forensic genetics/DNA laboratories, not only in Texas, but in the entire country,” said Roger Kahn, Ph.D., director of the Forensic Genetics Laboratory.

Through the years, the laboratory has put several measures in place to increase and improve the level of service it provides, including tripling its staff size to effectively handle its caseload, which doubled between 2007 and 2011. In addition, robotic automation and sophisticated computer systems and analysis instruments have been introduced to the lab.

The laboratory has also expanded its range of services to the community and to law enforcement agencies.

“In 2007, we began a bold initiative to encourage the agencies we serve to submit evidence from property crimes, such as burglaries, in particular – by far the most common crimes our citizens endure, and crimes that often remain unsolved,” Dr. Kahn said. “We promised to accept and test not only blood and saliva samples from property crimes but also ‘touch DNA’ samples, evidence collected from things that a burglar merely touched. Today, 50 percent of the cases we receive are from property crimes.”

A bold initiative that is delivering results. Since the Institute joined the FBI’s Combined DNA Index System (CODIS) in 2001, the Forensic Genetics Laboratory has made 3,532 CODIS matches with 73 percent of those matched linking an offender to a crime. Approximately three quarters of the offender matches are from property crimes. In other words, the lab has been able to link an offender to a property crime 1,700 times.

“Our laboratory leads all Texas labs in the total number of CODIS matches and in the number of CODIS offender matches,” Dr. Kahn added. “What’s more, it has always been the policy of the Institute that all sexual assault kits collected within our jurisdiction come directly from the hospital to our laboratory, and we begin testing almost immediately every kit we receive.”

A Result of Collaboration

The Institute began planning for the new facility approximately 7 years ago. The laboratory is a result of collaborative planning and thorough needs analysis.

“I applaud Harris County Commissioners Court for endorsing and supporting the expansion of the Forensic Genetics Laboratory here at the Texas Medical Center to meet the growing demands for DNA testing in our community,” Dr. Sanchez said. “Special mention is necessary to acknowledge the Harris County Sheriff Office’s initiative to increase DNA evidence collection at crime scenes.”

Also helping to shepherd the project to completion was recently retired Texas Medical Center president and CEO Richard Wainerdi, P.E., Ph.D. At the ceremony, Dr. Sanchez gratefully acknowledged Dr. Wainerdi’s support and guidance as well as his spirit and tenacity in fostering collaborative partnerships among the member institutions of the medical center.

“It is now up to the scientists to maximize the potential of this facility for the benefit of the community – science serving justice. We feel privileged to have been given the opportunity to

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meet this challenge, and I commit to you that we will not let you down,” Dr. Sanchez concluded.

To learn more about the Institute of Forensic Sciences, visit: www.hctx.net/ifs.

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PHOTO CUTLINES

HCIFS RC Lab 1 (Thumbnail)



The newly converted 15,000-square-foot facility was formerly the train bay for a Nabisco baking plant and is located in the Texas Medical Center's John P. McGovern Building. With construction complete, it will soon house the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences' new state-of-the art Forensic Genetics Laboratory.

HCIFS RC Lab 2 (Thumbnail)



The Forensic Genetics Laboratory will move from its existing location within the Institutes' main 30-year-old building to its new home and begin full operation after the first of the year.

HCIFS RC Lab 3 (Thumbnail)



“A place where science serves justice” – Luis A. Sanchez, M.D., executive director of the Institute of Forensic Sciences and Harris County's chief medical examiner, welcomes more than 100 forensic analysts, scientists, elected officials, invited guests and Harris County employees attending the Ribbon Cutting Ceremony held Wednesday, Oct. 31 for the Institute's new Forensic Genetics Laboratory.

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HCIFS RC Lab 4 (Thumbnail)



Harris County officials cut the ribbon and unveil the new Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences (HCIFS) Forensic Genetics Laboratory. Pictured left to right: Harris County Attorney Vince Ryan, Texas Medical Center President and CEO Richard Wainerdi, Harris County Judge Ed Emmett, Harris County District Attorney Patricia Lykos, HCIFS Executive Director and Chief Medical Examiner Dr. Luis A. Sanchez, Harris County Precinct 4 Commissioner R. Jack Cagle, retired former HCIFS Crime Lab Director Dr. Ashraf Mozayani, and HCIFS Forensic Genetics Laboratory Director Dr. Roger Kahn.

HCIFS RC Lab 5 (Thumbnail)



Nearly 100 forensic analysts, scientists, elected officials, invited guests and Harris County employees tour the newly unveiled Forensic Genetics Laboratory

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