BUILDING THE INFRASTRUCTURE FOR “JUSTICE THROUGH SCIENCE”*: THE TEXAS MODEL

Sandra Guerra Thompson** and Nicole Bremner Cássarez***

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* “Justice through Science” is the motto of the Texas Forensic Science Commission (“TFSC”). See TEX. FORENSIC SCI. COMM’N, http://www.fsc.texas.gov/; see also infra notes 45–69 and accompanying text. The authors owe a debt of gratitude to Lynn Garcia, General Counsel of the TFSC, for her insightful comments on an earlier draft of this Article.

** Alumnae College Professor of Law and Director of the Criminal Justice Institute at the University of Houston Law Center. Thompson represented the Texas public law schools on the Timothy Cole Advisory Panel on Wrongful Convictions which operated from 2009–2010. She is a charter member of the Board of Directors of the Houston Forensic Science Local Government Corporation, Inc. and now serves as the Vice Chair.

*** Attorney and Professor of Communication at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas. Cássarez was one of the lawyers who represented former Texas Death Row inmate Anthony Graves at the time of his exoneration in 2010. She is a charter member of the Board of Directors of the Houston Forensic Science Center Local Government Corporation, Inc. and now serves as the Board Chair.
I. INTRODUCTION

Texas now leads the country in the enactment of important criminal justice reforms that have reduced incarceration while providing more effective crime control.¹ This fact may startle those who understandably regard Texas as a strictly “law and order” jurisdiction with harsh punishments and little regard for due process.² The state’s steadfast embrace of the death penalty tends to convey that image.³ For many years, Texas also led the way in mass incarceration.⁴ However, state legislators have worked steadily for almost 10 years adopting important innovations that have reduced the prison population and encouraged rehabilitation.⁵ Beginning in 2007, the state’s efforts cut its incarceration rate by 11%,⁶ resulting in the closures of several prisons.⁷ It has made similar strides in lowering the juvenile incarceration rate as well, reducing the juvenile prison population by 48% from 2007 to 2010.⁸

² In fact, a more nuanced view suggests that Texas has long balanced harsh punishment with greater procedural protections in a number of areas. See generally Adam M. Gershowitz, Is Texas Tough on Crime but Soft on Criminal Procedure?, 49 AM. CRIM. L. REV. 31 (2012) (discussing comparatively progressive Texas rules regarding jury trial rights, prosecutorial (but not defense) discovery requirements, defendant choice of judge or jury sentencing, protections in custodial interrogations, a broad exclusionary rule, and other procedural protections).
³ Id. at 33–36 (discussing state’s reputation for harsh punishments due to being the “capital of capital punishment”).
⁴ Id. at 36–38.
⁶ See Moore, supra note 5.
⁸ The legislature changed sentencing policy in the juvenile system in similar fashion, leading to a dramatic decrease in the incarceration rate of juveniles from 2007 to 2011. See CHILDREN AT
A variety of circumstances coalesced to bring about these recent tectonic shifts in the Texas criminal justice landscape. Many credit the desire of state legislators to control criminal justice spending. Others point to a certain straightforward practicality in the state’s culture that made it amenable to evidence-based approaches for addressing root causes. Either way, the notion of saving taxpayer dollars by decreasing the state’s reliance on incarceration by turning to less expensive and more effective strategies for crime control, such as rehabilitative programs, seems to have carried the day.

This Article addresses another area of criminal justice reform in which the state has made great strides: reforms designed to prevent wrongful convictions, chief among them being innovations in state oversight and regulation of the practice of forensic science. Here, the politics of reform have unfolded quite differently. The dramatic reforms adopted by the legislature to prevent wrongful convictions, as is true of most reforms of this nature, are driven more by the need to maintain the public’s faith in the integrity of the criminal justice system than by any desire to save money. In a state that firmly supports the imposition of the death penalty, it is critical that its citizens believe in the fairness and accuracy of the criminal process. Wrongful convictions, especially in death penalty cases, deeply offend principles of moral decency. Forensic science scandals that undermine the legitimacy of murder convictions quickly threaten the capital punishment regime and the legitimacy of the entire criminal justice system. When news reports revealed the deep problems lurking in the Houston Police Department Crime Laboratory circa 2002, it did not take long for...

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9 See Editorial Board, supra note 1.

10 See Kruger, supra note 7 (discussing how the state’s “straightforward moral outlook” once led to tough criminal justice policy but has now shifted to more effective policy and crediting the state’s “fiscal conservatism” for contributing to the shift); Wilson, supra note 5 (crediting the legislature’s consultations with Tony Fabelo, an expert on evidence-based criminal justice policies, for shift to rehabilitative model of punishment). Fabelo is the Research Director for the Council of State Governments Justice Center which provides technical assistance to state and local governments to make efficient use of government resources in setting justice policies. For Dr. Fabelo’s professional biography, see Staff, Justice Ctr., https://csgjusticecenter.org/about-je/staff/ (last visited Nov. 3, 2016).

11 For example, the presiding officer of the first legislatively-created advisory panel to address wrongful convictions in the state viewed the legislation creating the advisory panel as a reflection of the state’s commitment to “honor, integrity, and fairness.” See Timothy Cole Advisory Panel on Wrongful Convictions, Report to the Texas Task Force on Indigent Defense iv (2010) [hereinafter TCAP REPORT], http://www.tide.texas.gov/media/25663/FINALTCAPreport.pdf. As he explained, “The State of Texas is obviously concerned about wrongful convictions. Justice must be meted out fairly or it loses all meaning . . . . Our interest lies in serving justice fairly and effectively to ensure the integrity of the rule of law.” Id.
city and state leaders to call for a moratorium on the imposition of death sentences based on testimony by the laboratory’s analysts.  

This Article surveys the important reforms adopted by the Texas legislature to advance the quality of forensic science that form what we call the “infrastructure” of forensic science in the state. In all, the legislature put into place six key components that now form the Texas forensic science infrastructure: (1) the Texas Forensic Science Commission;13 (2) the Texas Criminal Justice Integrity Unit (a stakeholder committee that hosts discussion meetings and training programs);14 (3) the Michael Morton Act, which instituted expansive prosecutorial disclosure from pre-plea to post-conviction;15 (4) the “junk science” writ, a habeas petition that allows challenges to the forensic science used to obtain a conviction if new evidence undermines the validity of the evidence;16 (5) the Office of Capital and Forensic Writs, a statewide public defender for habeas petitions;17 and (6) state laws requiring the preservation and testing of biological evidence.18  

The Article also describes two local innovations that have transformed the roles each institution plays in the criminal justice system and have become national models. The first innovation emerged from the shambles of the scandal-ridden Houston Police Department Crime Laboratory in the early 2000s.19 In 2014, the Houston Forensic Science Center took over the laboratory’s operations under the supervision of a board of directors consisting of community volunteers.20 The Dallas County District Attorney’s Office originated the second innovation by establishing the country’s first Conviction Integrity Unit in 2007.21 Prosecutors who work in the Dallas County Conviction Integrity Unit (“CIU”), as well as those in the other CIUs now established in the state’s other large cities, play important leadership roles in shaping state policies to prevent wrongful convictions and advance the practice of forensic science.22 Moreover, both of these local innovations have transformed the cultures in their respective  

12 See Sandra Guerra Thompson, Cops in Laboratory Coats: Curbing Wrongful Convictions through Independent Forensic Laboratories 207 (Carolina Acad. Press 2015).
13 See infra notes 45–69 and accompanying text.
14 See infra notes 70–78 and accompanying text.
15 See infra notes 79–115 and accompanying text.
16 See infra notes 116–26 and accompanying text.
17 See infra notes 114–21 and accompanying text.
18 See infra notes 122–24 and accompanying text.
19 See infra notes 143–81 and accompanying text.
20 See infra notes 174–76 and accompanying text.
21 See infra notes 182–224 and accompanying text.
22 See infra notes 182–224 and accompanying text.
institutions from highly adversarial to ones that embrace collaboration with the defense bar.\textsuperscript{23}

While largely descriptive, the Article aims to provide some guidance for lawmakers in other states grappling with exonerations and crime laboratory scandals. With the experience of having observed the operation of the infrastructure for several years, we also draw some lessons about the challenges the state faces in the future.

II. THE TEXAS FORENSIC SCIENCE INFRASTRUCTURE

The story about how Texas came to lead the nation in criminal justice reforms has many leading figures. However, to understand why Texas—of all states—has adopted more reforms to prevent wrongful convictions than any other, one has to mention the avalanche of negative headlines from 2002 to 2009 surrounding two separate problems: (1) the Houston Police Department Crime Laboratory\textsuperscript{24} and (2) the controversial execution of Cameron Todd Willingham, including Texas Governor Rick Perry’s decision not to grant his request for a stay of execution.\textsuperscript{25} While the two situations were unrelated, they both laid bare the shoddy forensic science that supported many criminal convictions, and they both generated bad press at roughly the same time.\textsuperscript{26}

The problems in the Houston Police Department (“HPD”) Crime Laboratory came first, beginning in 2002, when news reports exposed its deplorable conditions.\textsuperscript{27} Two years later, in 2004, a man named George Rodriguez walked out of prison after serving 17 years behind bars for a rape he did not commit.\textsuperscript{28} Rodriguez became the first of several high-profile exonerations in which HPD Crime Laboratory analysts were found to have given invalid

\textsuperscript{23} See infra notes 158–73 and accompanying text.


\textsuperscript{26} The Houston Police Department Crime Lab scandal broke out in 2002, but it continued unabated until 2011. See Liptak, supra note 24; Madigan, supra note 24. The publicity over Cameron Todd Willingham’s execution started in 2004. See infra note 40.

\textsuperscript{27} See THOMPSON, supra note 12, at 1–33 (discussing the discovery of problems at the Houston Police Department Crime Laboratory and how invalid forensic evidence led to George Rodriguez’s wrongful conviction).

\textsuperscript{28} Id.
scientific testimony. The widespread and serious nature of the problems in the laboratory led one auditor to conclude that the Houston laboratory was “the paradigmatic example of a failed forensic agency.” From the initial reports in 2002 until at least 2008, the Houston laboratory continued to generate scathing news stories.

At about the same time that the HPD Crime Laboratory scandal unfolded in the early 2000s, Cameron Todd Willingham’s death penalty case was reaching the end. Willingham, a white man from Corsicana, Texas, had been convicted of capital murder by arson of his three young daughters who died in a house fire on a cold December morning, two days before Christmas, in 1991. His conviction rested on the testimony of two arson investigators as well as that of a jailhouse informant.

After all of Willingham’s appeals had been exhausted, his court-appointed attorney asked Gerald Hurst, a leading fire investigator and fire scientist, to search for new evidence to include in a clemency petition. In reviewing the evidence from Willingham’s trial, Hurst determined that the arson investigators’ testimony was based on invalid fire science and that the fire was most likely accidental. Willingham filed a petition seeking clemency based on this new scientific evidence, which was unanimously denied by the Texas Board of Pardons and Parole. Willingham’s lawyer then sought a stay of execution from Governor Perry, providing the same scientific proof that Willingham’s conviction had been secured through invalid forensic testimony. On Willingham’s scheduled execution date, February 17, 2004, the governor denied the stay of execution “based on the facts of the case.” Willingham was executed. He had begged his parents to never stop trying to vindicate him.

News stories after Willingham’s death caused many to believe that Texas had executed an innocent man, and Governor Perry’s decision to deny his

29 Id.
30 Paul C. Giannelli, Wrongful Convictions and Forensic Science: The Need to Regulate Crime Labs, 86 N.C.L. REV. 163, 187–88 (quoting Michael R. Bromwich, the Independent Investigator hired by the City of Houston to conduct an audit of the HPD Crime Laboratory in the wake of news reports of problems in the laboratory).
31 See THOMPSON, supra note 12, at 205–11.
32 See Liptak, supra note 24; Madigan, supra note 24.
33 See Grann, supra note 25.
34 Id.
35 Id.
36 Id.
37 Id.
38 Id.
39 Id.
petition for a stay of execution gained notoriety. Whether Willingham was innocent or not, it is clear that the ostensible “scientific” evidence in his case was patently incorrect and not based on valid scientific principles. (Years after his execution, the jailhouse informant would recant, and other evidence came to light that the prosecutor in Willingham’s case had withheld exculpatory evidence, further intensifying doubts about his guilt.)

Thus, in 2004, two important cases made headlines. That year, George Rodriguez was exonerated, bringing calls from two successive HPD Police Chiefs, the city’s mayor, and other public officials for a moratorium on executions in cases involving evidence produced by the HPD Crime Laboratory. This was the same year in which Willingham was executed, almost immediately raising questions about whether bad forensic science had caused a wrongful execution. Following these scandals, state lawmakers enacted legislation that would dramatically improve the practice of forensic science and its use by the courts.

By 2005, the movement to prevent wrongful convictions took hold in the state and has not diminished to date. The legislature, as well as leaders in the state’s larger cities, has made paradigm-shifting changes in the administration of criminal justice generally, and especially in the area of forensic science. We will discuss each reform affecting forensic science in turn.

A. The Texas Forensic Science Commission

In 2005, a year after Willingham’s execution and Rodriguez’s exoneration, the Texas legislature created the Texas Forensic Science Commission (“TFSC”). The TFSC, which adopted the motto “Justice through Science,” plays a critical role in regulating the practice of forensic science in the state.
Only two other states in the country, New York and Delaware, have similar commissions with statewide reach, but those commissions have considerably narrower authority than the TFSC. 46

The TFSC consists of seven scientists, five drawn from the faculties of the state’s public universities, two forensic scientists, and two attorneys, one who is a prosecutor and the other a defense attorney. 47 By law, the prosecutor must be chosen from a list of 10 candidates submitted by the Texas District and County Attorneys Association, and the defense attorney must be selected from a list of 10 submitted by the Texas Criminal Defense Attorneys Association. 48 The Governor appoints the chair and three members, the Lieutenant Governor appoints three members, and Attorney General appoints two members. 49

The TFSC has been granted broad power to ensure the integrity of the evidence produced in the state’s crime laboratories. 50 Its enabling legislation grants the TFSC the authority to investigate allegations of “professional

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47 Id. § 3(a)(2), (3).

48 Id. § 3.

49  The question of the Commission’s jurisdiction became an issue in 2009 when the group planned to hold hearings to investigate the arson testimony used in Cameron Todd Willingham’s case. See supra notes 44–45 and accompanying text. For an account of the controversy surrounding this issue, see The Texas Forensic Science Commission and the Willingham Case, Innocence Project (Sept. 14, 2010), http://www.innocenceproject.org/the-texas-forensic-science-commission-and-the-willingham-case/; Hall, supra note 46. In the end, the Commission was prohibited from investigating “specific items of evidence that were tested or offered into evidence prior to September 1, 2005.” The Texas Forensic Science Commission and the Willingham Case, supra; see also Hall, supra note 46 (noting that the TFSC’s “first case,” the Willingham case, “nearly destroyed” the TFSC).
negligence or professional misconduct that would substantially affect the integrity of the results of a forensic analysis conducted by an accredited laboratory.” To this end, the TFSC requires all forensic laboratories to self-report any error or irregularity that might affect the integrity of a laboratory test. Any employee or person from outside of the organization may report a laboratory issue to the TFSC anonymously as well. The TFSC will ensure that laboratories implement corrective actions when appropriate in the wake of a reported incident.

The TFSC’s first investigation of professional negligence involved a complaint filed by the Innocence Project challenging the forensic evidence offered to convict Cameron Todd Willingham. On the eve of the TFSC’s scheduled hearing, Governor Perry suddenly “fired” the chairman and two members of the TFSC and then appointed a prosecutor as chairman, who then effectively scuttled the investigation into the Willingham case.

Despite the controversy, the TFSC ultimately released a report discrediting the arson indicators used by fire investigators to convict Willingham and others. The report did not consider whether the arson investigators had engaged in professional misconduct or negligence, as it was not clear whether the Commission had the authority to pursue such an investigation. Rather, the 2011 report suggested 17 reforms to bring arson investigations into accord with modern science, and recommended that old arson convictions be reviewed.

Later that same year, the Texas Attorney General ruled that the TFSC did not have jurisdiction to review evidence that was tested or offered in court.

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52 The requirement to report problematic incidents to the TFSC flows from standards for accreditation that laboratories must maintain, as reported by Lynn Garcia, General Counsel for the TFSC, in a telephone conversation with co-author Thompson on Aug. 18, 2016.
53 This reporting process operates under the Commission’s authority to investigate complaints of professional negligence or malfeasance. Tex. Code Crim. Proc. art. 38.01 § 4(a)(1)–(2) (West 2015).
55 McKinley, supra note 54; Smith & Lavandera, supra note 54.
56 McKinley, supra note 54; Smith & Lavandera, supra note 54. For a more detailed analysis of the Willingham case, see Grann, supra note 25.
58 See id. at 39–52.
before 2005, the year the Commission was established.\(^59\) Thus, the Willingham report had considered the scientific validity of the arson indicators without running afoul of the jurisdictional limitation outlined in the Attorney General’s ruling. Although the future of the TFSC seemed to hang in the balance during these early years, ultimately the TFSC regained its footing and has grown in statutory authority and community stature ever since.

The TFSC’s most important role is to regulate forensic laboratories by overseeing the state requirement that all forensic laboratories be accredited.\(^60\) As of June 2015, the legislature transferred the authority to accredit laboratories to the TFSC from the Department of Public Safety, the state’s police agency. It is critical that this function was removed from the organizational control of the state police and placed in the control of an organization independent of law enforcement that is directed by academic scientists.\(^61\)

In addition, a new requirement will mandate that all laboratory analysts as of 2019 be individually licensed in their disciplines.\(^62\) The TFSC is charged with establishing qualifications for licensing including “(a) successful completion of education requirements; (b) specific coursework and experience, including instruction in courtroom testimony and ethics; (c) successful completion of an examination required or recognized by the commission; and (d) successful completion of proficiency testing to the extent required for crime laboratory accreditation.”\(^63\) Since 2015, this program has been guided by an advisory board of seven forensic scientists, one defense attorney, and one prosecutor, selected by their respective state professional organizations.\(^64\)

Through the TFSC’s oversight of laboratory protocols and analyst qualifications, the TFSC has raised the overall quality of forensic science statewide. The TFSC also holds stakeholder conferences and training

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60 The legislature transferred the authority to oversee laboratory accreditation from the Department of Public Safety, the state’s law enforcement agency, to the TFSC, making it independent of law enforcement. See Texas Forensic Science Commission Crime Laboratory Accreditation Program, TEX. FORENSIC SCI. COMM’N, http://www.fsc.texas.gov/texas-forensic-science-commission-crime-laboratory-accreditation-program (last visited Nov. 3, 2016).

61 See THOMPSON, supra note 12, at 193–97 (discussing the importance of independence from law enforcement organizations to promote rigor in the accreditation process for crime laboratories).


63 Id.

64 Id.
programs,65 and participates in those held by other state organizations.66 TFSC representatives also participate at the national level in forensic science reform.67

The TFSC has also recommended against the use of one type of junk science in the state, which sets a precedent for its examination of other types in the future. In 2016, the TFSC recommended that bite mark evidence not be admitted in criminal cases until the techniques used are demonstrated to be reliable and valid.68 Furthermore, the TFSC has facilitated important systemic reviews of past convictions when it has been discovered that a type of forensic evidence was unreliable.69

B. The Texas Criminal Justice Integrity Unit

In 2008, Judge Barbara Hervey of the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals, formed an ad hoc group called the Texas Criminal Justice Integrity Unit (TCJIU), under the auspices of the Court of Criminal Appeals.70 The group’s goals are “to review the strengths and weaknesses of the Texas criminal justice system” and “to bring about meaningful reform through education, training, and legislative recommendations.”71 The group has studied the causes of wrongful convictions, such as eyewitness identification practices, interrogations, and inadequate defense representation.72


66 The authors have attended meetings and symposia at which the General Counsel of the TFSC has spoken, such as a stakeholders meeting of the Texas Conviction Integrity Unit held in 2015.

67 *See* *FOURTH ANNUAL REPORT*, *supra* note 65, at 25. The presiding officer of the TFSC, Dr. Vincent J. Di Maio, currently serves on the National Forensic Science Commission (“NFSC”), one of two members from Texas. The other Texas member of the NFSC is Judge Barbara Hervey, the founder and Chair of the Texas Conviction Integrity Unit. *See infra* notes 70–78 and accompanying text.


69 *See infra* Part III.

70 *See Welcome to the Texas Criminal Justice Integrity Unit, TEX. JUD. BRANCH CT. OF CRIM. APP.,* http://www.txcourts.gov/cca/texas-criminal-justice-integrity-unit.aspx (last visited Nov. 3, 2016). Judge Hervey also serves as one of the state’s two representatives on the National Forensic Science Commission. *See FOURTH ANNUAL REPORT*, *supra* note 65.

71 *See Welcome to the Texas Criminal Justice Integrity Unit, supra* note 70.

With respect to forensic science, the group has undertaken to “reform[] the standards for collection, preservation, and storage of evidence” and “improve[] crime lab reliability.”

73 To that end, in 2009 the TCJIU surveyed state judges regarding their reactions to the National Academy of Sciences report, Strengthening Forensic Science in the United States, A Path Forward (the “NAS Report”), which was published in the same year.

74 The survey showed that state judges did not feel sufficiently educated in forensic science and the standards for admissibility.

75 Responding to that desire, the TCJIU has held judicial training programs, in conjunction with the TFSC.

The TCJIU has also convened stakeholders’ meetings to discuss concerns related to forensic science. One such meeting included a presentation by the TFSC’s General Counsel regarding the need to undertake a massive review of convictions involving DNA mixture evidence. Although the FBI notified all laboratories about potential mixture analysis issues in May of 2015, to date, Texas is the only state that has undertaken such a review.

C. The Michael Morton Act Adopts Broad Prosecutorial Discovery

In 2009, the legislature built on the growing criminal justice reform momentum by creating a stakeholder group, including judges, legal experts, legislators, and law enforcement representatives, to advise the Texas Indigent Defense Commission regarding the causes of wrongful convictions and suggestions for preventing wrongful convictions.

79 The group, known as the Timothy Cole Advisory Panel on Wrongful Convictions (“TCAP”), was named for a Lubbock man who had been wrongly convicted and who had died of an asthma attack while incarcerated. Cole, a 26-year old African-American Army

73 Id.

74 Id.; see also COMM. ON IDENTIFYING THE NEEDS OF FORENSIC SCI. CMTY., NAT’L RES. COUNCIL, STRENGTHENING FORENSIC SCIENCE IN THE UNITED STATES: A PATH FORWARD (2009) [hereinafter NAS REPORT].

75 Id. at 26–28.

76 For a list of past training programs and meetings, see TCJIU Meetings, TEX. JUD. BRANCH CT. CRIM. APP., http://www.txcourts.gov/cca/texas-criminal-justice-integrity-unit/meetings.aspx (last visited Nov. 3, 2016).

77 Both of the authors attended this meeting. For a discussion of the DNA mixtures review, see infra notes 250–59 and accompanying text.

78 See infra note 258 and accompanying text.

79 The Executive Director of the Texas Indigent Defense Commission (formerly known as the Texas Task Force on Indigent Defense) served as the TCAP’s presiding officer and the Commission’s staff supported TCAP’s work with research drafting and report production. See TCAP REPORT, supra note 11; TIMOTHY COLE ADVISORY PANEL ON WRONGFUL CONVICTIONS, RESEARCH DETAILS (2010), http://www.tidc.texas.gov/media/25674/FINALTCAPresearch.pdf.

80 See Timothy Cole, INNOCENCE PROJECT, http://www.innocenceproject.org/cases/timothy-cole/ (last visited Nov. 3, 2016). Co-author Thompson was a member of the advisory panel.
veteran, was enrolled at Texas Tech University when he was wrongly identified as a serial rapist dubbed the “Tech rapist.” Convicted on the basis of erroneous eyewitness testimony and false forensic testimony, he had served 23 years of a 25-year sentence for rape when he died in prison of an asthma attack. A court posthumously exonerated him on April 7, 2009, and Governor Perry pardoned him on March 1, 2010.

In 2010, the TCAP recommended six legislative reforms, two of which came to form part of the forensic science infrastructure: prosecutorial disclosure requirements and the “junk science” writ. The TCAP identified prosecutorial discovery as a means of reducing wrongful convictions. At the time, the state’s discovery law severely restricted a defendant’s access to the prosecution’s evidence. To access records, documents, or other evidence contained in prosecution files, criminal defendants were statutorily required to obtain a court order based on a showing of good cause. Even then, the statute specifically excluded written witness statements and documents considered work product, such as police and laboratory reports, from pre-trial discovery. Although many Texas district and county attorneys had voluntarily implemented open-file policies by 2013, the scope of discovery available under those policies varied from county to county and from prosecutor to prosecutor. As a result, a defendant’s ability to obtain information from the State differed based on where the arrest occurred and who was assigned to prosecute the case.

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81 Id.
82 Id.
83 Id.
84 See TCAP REPORT, supra note 11, at 30–31. For a discussion of the “junk science” writ, see infra notes 116–26 and accompanying text. The report also led to the adoption of a state-of-the art model policy on eyewitness identification and a requirement that police departments should adopt guidelines that comply with the model policy. See TEX. CODE CRIM. PROC. art. 38.20, § 3(b) (2011); MODEL POLICY ON EYEWITNESS IDENTIFICATION, http://www.lemitonline.org/publications/documents/ewid_final.pdf.
86 See id. at 8 (setting out text of former TEXAS CODE CRIM. PROC. art. 39.14 (current version at TEX. CODE CRIM. PROC. ANN. art. 39.14 (West 2015))).
87 Id.; see also Brem v. State, 571 S.W. 3d 314, 322 (Tex. Crim. App. 1978) (holding that police reports were exempt from pre-trial discovery under former Art. 39.14 as work product). Of course, investigative reports that contained exculpatory material were nevertheless subject to disclosure under Brady v. Maryland, 373 U.S. 83, 87 (1963). See, e.g., Ex parte Miles, 359 S.W. 3d 647, 670 (Tex. Crim. App. 2012) (holding that investigative reports exempt from statutory discovery should have been disclosed because they contained exculpatory evidence).
88 See 2013 DISCOVERY REPORT, supra note 85, at 5.
89 Id.
The TCAP report alone was not sufficient, however, to bring about the needed reform. It also took two highly publicized exonerations in 2010 and 2011, respectively, both involving Texas prosecutors who withheld exculpatory evidence in violation of *Brady v. Maryland*,90 to jolt the Texas legislature into taking action.91 One of those cases involved a white man named Michael Morton, who had spent almost 25 years in prison for the murder of his wife, before DNA testing both established his innocence and identified his wife’s real killer.92 An investigation by the Innocence Project revealed that the prosecutor in that case, Ken Anderson, had failed to produce significant evidence of Morton’s innocence both to the defense and the trial judge.93 Anderson, who had since become a district judge, ultimately resigned his position, surrendered his law license and pleaded guilty to criminal contempt charges for withholding evidence in the Morton case.94 He was sentenced to serve 10 days in jail, pay a $500 fine, and perform 500 hours of community service.95

In 2013, state lawmakers enacted the Michael Morton Act (the “Morton Act”), which created a state-wide open-file discovery policy that took effect in January 2014.96 Morton’s wrongful conviction had highlighted a fundamental weakness of the *Brady* doctrine: under *Brady*, prosecutors enjoy wide discretion to determine whether specific pieces of evidence qualify as exculpatory such that

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90  373 U.S. 83, 87 (1963) (requiring prosecutors to disclose “evidence favorable to an accused . . . where the evidence was material to guilt or punishment”).


95  *Id.* Anderson served only five days of his prison sentence; county officials said he was released early for good behavior. See Claire Osborn, *How Ken Anderson was Released After Only Five Days in Jail*, STATESMAN (Nov. 15, 2013), http://www.statesman.com/news/news/local/ken-anderson-released-from-williamson-county-jail/nbtKN/.

they must be disclosed to the defense. The Morton Act did away with this prosecutorial discretion, mandating that the State must produce “as soon as practicable after receiving a timely request from the defendant” almost all relevant, non-privileged information about a case that is in the State’s possession or control. Entities under contract with the State, such as forensics laboratories, for example, are considered to be part of the State for discovery purposes. In particular, the statute requires production of police incident reports as well as written and recorded witness statements, “including witness statements of law enforcement officers”—items that had been considered exempt from discovery under prior law. And while the Morton Act allows prosecutors to release a document in redacted form, defense counsel must be notified of the redaction, and can request that a court determine whether the redaction was justified.

Subsection (h) of the Morton Act codifies the prosecution’s duties under *Brady*, stating that the State must disclose to the defendant any “exculpatory, impeachment, or mitigating” information that “tends to negate the guilt of the defendant or would tend to reduce the punishment for the offense charged.” Importantly, Subsection (k) of the Morton Act takes this one step further by imposing an ongoing duty on the State to disclose *Brady* material without a request from the defense, even post-conviction. That subsection mandates that the State “promptly” disclose any newly obtained *Brady* material to the defendant or the court, whether it is discovered “before, during, or after trial.”

Since the passage of the Morton Act, Texas prosecutors and defense counsel have faced some challenges regarding implementation of the Act’s provisions. The broad discovery requirement was intended to prevent prosecutorial misconduct, but it also affected the practice of forensic science by

98 TEX. CODE CRIM. PROC. ANN. art. 39.14(a) (West 2015).
99 Id.
100 Id.
101 See supra note 85 and accompanying text.
102 TEX. CODE CRIM. PROC. ANN. art. 39.14(c) (West 2015).
103 Id. art. 39.14(h).
104 Id. art. 39.14(k).
105 See generally MORTON ACT REPORT, supra note 91 (noting issues encountered during the Morton Act’s first year of implementation, including instances of improper redactions or withholding of documents, discovery delays, and confusion among law enforcement officers regarding what they are required to provide to prosecutors under the Act).
imposing new disclosure obligations on forensic laboratories.106 This has resulted in a need for Morton Act training among crime lab personnel, as well as concern regarding allocating the costs of complying with the Act’s discovery requirements.107 Nevertheless, Texas’s criminal discovery statute, which had been one of the least robust in the country, is now considered a model for other states, as well as a step forward on the path to criminal justice reform.108

It is worth noting as well that the legislature also significantly strengthened the enforcement of prosecutorial disclosure when, in 2013, it extended the statute of limitations for exonerees to file a grievance with the state bar against prosecutors who engage in misconduct.109 Under the prior law, complaints had to be filed within four years of when the prosecutor engaged in the misconduct, or when concealed misconduct was discovered or should have been discovered.110 The new law, which was also enacted in response to the Morton exoneration,111 provides that the four-year limitations period does not begin until the day the wrongly convicted individual is released from prison.112 As a result, Texas death row exoneree Anthony Graves—who served more than 18 years in prison before being cleared of capital murder113—was able to file a complaint against the prosecutor who withheld evidence in his case, resulting in an unprecedented disbarment.114 The Morton Act, considered along with the strengthened enforcement of disclosure requirements and extended time for grievances to be filed against prosecutors who suppress evidence, should reduce

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106 See supra note 98 and accompanying text.


109 TEX. GOV’T. CODE ANN. § 81.072(b) (West 2013).


111 See Maurice Chammah, Senate Passes Prosecutor Accountability Bill, THE TEX. TRIB. (March 26, 2013), https://www.texastribune.org/2013/03/26/senate-passes-prosecutor-accountability-bill/ (noting that legislative author of bill had said it was inspired by the Morton case).

112 TEX. GOV’T. CODE ANN. § 81.072(b) (West 2013).

113 See MORTON ACT REPORT, supra note 91.

wrongful convictions. As Michael Morton told reporters after Governor Rick Perry signed the Morton Act into law, “This will make it much better for everybody else, so that what happened to me won’t happen to you.”115

D. The “Junk Science” Writ: Overturning Convictions Based on Invalid Science

The Timothy Cole Advisory Panel on Wrongful Convictions also recommended in 2010 that the legislature create a special writ of habeas corpus whereby courts would reconsider convictions that were based on forensic evidence later determined to be invalid.116 A year later, in 2011, Neal Hampton Robbins challenged his capital murder conviction, which rested almost entirely on the testimony of a medical examiner who had subsequently determined that her own trial testimony was not correct.117 The Court of Criminal Appeals rejected Robbins’s habeas petition, and, in so doing, created a firestorm of controversy that helped to motivate the enactment of the junk science writ.118

The advisory panel’s recommendation, combined with the problematic example of the Robbins case, apparently precipitated the 2013 statutory enactment of a “junk science writ” (as it is colloquially called) by the Texas legislature, the first of its kind in the country.119 The law expands the right of a prisoner to challenge his or her conviction on the basis of newly discovered evidence by allowing a claim on the grounds of “new scientific evidence.”120 After further controversy over whether the new law applied to a situation where an expert changes her opinion, rather than relies on new scientific knowledge, like Robbins, the legislature in 2015 expanded the grounds of the writ to include

116 TACP REPORT, supra note 11, at ii; see supra notes 68–73 and accompanying text.
118 Id. at 463; see also ME Testimony False According to Science But Not Texas Law, or, Elsa Alcala’s First Solo Dance Earns Spotlight, GRITS FOR BREAKFAST (July 19, 2011), http://gritsforbreakfast.blogspot.com/2011/07/me-testimony-false-according-to-science.html (discussing the Court of Criminal Appeals rejection of Robbins’s petition).
120 See Thomas, supra note 119, at 1051.
changes in the scientific conclusions by a testifying expert.121 The court ultimately granted Robbins a new trial in 2015.122

Almost immediately, litigants seized upon the new writ in cases that would not have been otherwise reviewable. Two months after the new writ became law, three of the four women known in the press as the “San Antonio four” relied on the writ to have their sexual assault convictions overturned.123 Another defendant, Rigoberto Avila, used the new junk science writ to have his January 2014 execution postponed.124 His murder conviction for the death of his girlfriend’s toddler was based on forensic testimony regarding the cause of the child’s fatal internal injuries.125 On March 9, 2016, the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals sent the case back to the El Paso trial court to review Avila’s claim regarding the validity of that forensic evidence.126

E. The Office of Capital and Forensic Writs

While the “junk science writ” opened the courthouse doors to defendants convicted on the basis of invalid forensic evidence, those defendants need legal counsel to assist them. Accordingly, the Texas Legislature in 2015 enlarged the mission of the Office of Capital Writs (“OCW”) to provide counsel for criminal defendants who have grounds to file junk science habeas petitions, and renamed the OCW as the Office of Capital and Forensic Writs (“OCFW”).127

125 Id.
127 See S.B. 1743, 2015 Leg., 84th Reg. Sess. (Tex. 2015), http://www.capitol.state.tx.us/BillLookup/History.aspx?LegSess=84R&Bill=SB1743. The idea was the brain child of Governor Perry’s criminal justice policy director who suggested that the legislature expand the OCW to include attorneys who specialized in both forensic science and habeas proceedings. She made the suggestion during a brainstorming discussion at a meeting of the Texas Criminal Justice Integrity Unit. Co-author Thompson attended this meeting.
Initially, the legislature created the OCW to handle capital writs in response to another long-simmering scandal. For years, Texas judges appointed post-conviction habeas counsel for indigent death row inmates from a list of so-called “qualified” counsel, some of whom had repeatedly missed crucial deadlines or filed embarrassingly inadequate writs of habeas corpus for their clients. After multiple media reports regarding how these appointed attorneys had mismanaged or even forfeited their clients’ appellate rights, the legislature in 2009 created the OCW as a public defense office for state death row appeals to provide the specialized habeas protection needed in cases involving forensic science irregularity. As of September 1, 2010, Texas district court judges have been required to appoint the OCW attorneys to represent death-sentenced individuals in state post-conviction habeas proceedings.

As mentioned above, the Texas state legislature in 2015 expanded the OCW’s duties to include filing state habeas petitions on behalf of inmates convicted on the basis of faulty forensic science and changed the office’s name. Under the new statutory provisions, OCFW lawyers are tasked with representing inmates in cases referred to the OCFW by the Texas Forensic Science Commission. This expansion of the OCFW’s jurisdiction has been questioned, given that the legislature failed to provide the office with an increased budget to handle its new responsibilities. However, the OCFW can refuse to accept either capital or forensic appointments if the office is overburdened or lacks sufficient resources to provide adequate representation.

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131 TEX. CODE CRIM. PROC. ANN. art. 11.071 § 2(c) (West 2015); 2009 TEX. SESS. LAW SERV. Ch. 781 (S.B. 1091) (West).

132 Tex. S.B. 1743.

133 TEX. CODE CRIM. PROC. ANN. art. 38.01, § 4(h) (West 2015).


135 TEX. GOV’T. CODE ANN. § 78.054(a) (West 2015).
F. Preserving and Testing Biological Evidence: Justice for Victims of Sexual Assault and Facilitating the Discovery of Wrongful Convictions

In the past, biological evidence used to obtain convictions might be destroyed at some point after the conviction was affirmed on appeal.\textsuperscript{136} However, the use of DNA testing to discover wrongful convictions exposed the critical need to preserve this biological evidence for longer periods of time.\textsuperscript{137} Thus, the Texas legislature now requires the preservation and storage of biological evidence for a period of 40 years or longer for cases in which the perpetrator is not apprehended, and until a defendant dies or completes the sentence, depending on the type of offense committed, for biological evidence used to obtain a conviction.\textsuperscript{138}

In addition, the legislature addressed the concern that too often biological evidence went untested, resulting in many unsolved sexual assault cases. To bring overdue justice to sexual assault survivors, Texas state law now requires the testing of all biological evidence collected in sexual assault cases.\textsuperscript{139} To help pay for the testing of a large backlog of biological evidence specimens, the legislature imposed a tax on sexually-oriented businesses.\textsuperscript{140}

III. LOCAL INNOVATIONS BECOME NATIONAL MODELS

In Texas, criminal justice reform at the state level has been fueled by problems and innovations at the local level. In Dallas, for example, the successes of innocence projects in exonerating the wrongly convicted caught the attention of a newly elected District Attorney. In response, he decided to involve his prosecutors directly in the process of reviewing past convictions.\textsuperscript{141} In Houston, the scandals at the HPD Crime Laboratory brought about fundamental changes in the organizational structure of Houston’s forensic laboratory.\textsuperscript{142} Thus, in the state’s two largest cities, city leaders embarked on ambitious projects to improve the quality of criminal justice in ways that would impact the practice of forensic


\textsuperscript{138} \textsc{Tex. Code Crim. Proc. Ann.} art. 38.42(c) (West 2015).

\textsuperscript{139} \textsc{See Tex. Gov’t. Code Ann.} § 420.042 (West 2011).


\textsuperscript{141} \textsc{See infra} notes 143–52 and accompanying text.

\textsuperscript{142} \textsc{See infra} notes 182–224 and accompanying text.
science statewide. Indeed, both cities’ projects have become national models as well.

A. The Dallas District Attorney’s Office Invents Conviction Integrity Units

Craig Watkins, a defense attorney who had never served as a prosecutor, became the first African-American District Attorney for Dallas County, Texas, in 2006. At the time, Dallas County had the largest number of DNA exonerations in the country, and Watkins believed the District Attorney’s Office could facilitate the process of finding additional wrongful convictions that had yet to be discovered.

To do this, Watkins developed an innovative approach to address the problem of wrongful convictions: he established the first “Conviction Integrity Unit” ("CIU") in the country in 2007. In what would become a national model, he charged the prosecutors in this unit to partner with attorneys at the Innocence Project of Texas to review hundreds of old cases to ensure that innocent people had not been wrongly convicted. The partnership gave the innocence project attorneys an unprecedented degree of access to police and prosecutor case files, as well as the power to subpoena key witnesses. From the beginning, Watkins screened the prosecutors who would work in this unit to ensure that they demonstrated a dedication to ethical practice by asking applicants to discuss the ethical challenges of evidentiary disclosure.

Dallas County had so many exonerations in part because, unlike many other jurisdictions, the county had preserved its biological evidence rather than destroy it after cases had concluded. The cases that Watkins identified for...
review included many in which prosecutors had previously worked vigorously to defeat defendants’ requests for DNA testing. As of 2014, the Dallas CIU was responsible for the release of 33 wrongly convicted people.

Prosecutors around the country followed Watkins’s lead to establish over 25 such CIUs. Fourteen of these CIUs have been announced since the start of 2014. Although CIUs are estimated to operate in less than 1% of all local district and county attorney’s offices, in Texas, the trend to establish CIUs has caught on widely. The five largest urban centers in the state—Harris County (Houston), Dallas County (Dallas), Bexar County (San Antonio), Travis County (Austin), and Tarrant County (Fort Worth)—have CIUs in their District Attorney’s Offices. The newest CIU, in Tarrant County, was established in 2016 and has already uncovered one wrongful conviction.

While not directly impacting the quality of forensic science, the CIUs have uncovered problems with forensic evidence. For example, police departments around the country, including the HPD, have used notoriously unreliable drug field tests for many years. The Department of Justice in 1978 declared that these tests were so unreliable that they “should not be used for evidential purposes,” and their results continue to be inadmissible as evidence in most American jurisdictions. The problem in Houston (and elsewhere) is that way as Dallas County); Goodwyn, supra note 145 (commenting on the “treasure trove” of biological evidence Dallas County had preserved).

See Ware, supra note 144, at 1041–49 (summarizing illustrative Dallas County exonerations and describing “intransigence” on part of previous district attorneys who had opposed DNA testing).

See Barber, supra note 143.


Id. at 11.

See Fromson, supra note 148.

Id.

See Dawn Boswell, Tarrant DA Examines Claims of Innocence, Wrongful Convictions, STAR-TELEGRAM (Mar. 18, 2016), http://www.star-telegram.com/opinion/opn-columns-blogs/other-voices/article66982412.html. Unfortunately, medium-sized and smaller cities and towns have not had the wherewithal to establish CIUs, thus leaving huge gaps in the availability of conviction integrity reviews statewide. This is an issue that is somewhat filled by the statewide forensic reviews facilitated by state agencies. See supra Part III. Nonetheless, it would behoove state leaders to study methods for providing regional prosecution resources to facilitate ongoing reexamination of convictions in those areas.


Id.
people—many of whom were actually innocent—were allowed to plead guilty to drug charges before confirmatory drug tests could be performed.160

Fortunately, the Manager of the Controlled Substances Section of the Houston Forensic Science Center, James Miller, made it his practice to hold onto drug evidence, even following guilty pleas when the law would normally allow destruction of the evidence.161 He made it the laboratory’s practice to test all drug evidence, and if those tests showed no controlled substances were present, he notified the District Attorney’s Office accordingly.162

These laboratory reports had gone unnoticed in the District Attorney’s Office until early 2014 when Inger Chandler, the Chief of the Harris County District Attorney’s CIU, got a tip from a reporter about the possibility that Houston might have wrongful convictions of this type.163 The reporter had found 21 reported cases where courts had reversed drug convictions because the laboratory reports later showed no drugs were present.164 Chandler’s investigation uncovered hundreds of cases in which people pleaded guilty based on information that varied from the laboratory report, 212 of which indicated no controlled substances were present.165 She then began the process of notifying defense counsel and defendants of the discovery, as is required under the Morton Act.166 As described above, unlike other states, the Morton Act requires Texas prosecutors to notify defendants and defense counsel about exonerating information post-conviction.167

In 2015, about one-third of the 149 exonerations in the country were Harris County drug cases in which people had pleaded guilty.168 The 42 Harris County cases represent 89% of all the drug exonerations in 2015.169 Since mid-2014 when Chandler began her investigation, the Harris County CIU has brought about 73 exonerations.170

Working with the Houston Forensic Science Center,171 Chandler helped to implement a new policy to test drug evidence in the order in which it arrives at the lab. If the tests prove there are no illegal substances present, the public

160 Id.
161 Id.
162 Id.
163 Id.
164 Id.
165 Id.
166 Id.
167 See TEX. CODE CRIM. PROC. ANN. art. 39.14(h)–(k) (West 2015).
168 Id.
170 Id.
171 Id. at 10.
172 See infra notes 192–224 and accompanying text.
defender’s office is notified so its attorneys can file a writ to have the conviction reversed. 172 The public defender’s office, which handles most of the cases, gives priority to any cases in which someone is currently serving a sentence. 173

Prosecutors in the state’s CIUs have also assisted legislatively-created stakeholder groups that study the causes of wrongful convictions by advocating for best practices and sharing information about their offices’ innovative practices. The Dallas County CIU advocated for the adoption of best practices in eyewitness identification procedures used by the state’s police departments. 174 The Tarrant County unit hosted a meeting of the Timothy Cole Advisory Panel on Wrongful Convictions, the state’s first stakeholder group studying wrongful convictions, to demonstrate how its electronic discovery system allows most defense counsel to access their clients’ case files by logging into a computer system established by the District Attorney’s Office. 175 At a recent meeting of a second such stakeholder group, the chief of the Tarrant County CIU told the group about the office’s new police informant tracking system that better enables the office to notify defense counsel about the backgrounds of police informants. 176

Thus, the Dallas CIU put in place a new and powerful mechanism for uncovering wrongful convictions, but CIUs have accomplished much more. When wrongful convictions are discovered, prosecutors in CIUs also conduct root causes analyses, along with other participants in the criminal justice system, such as public defenders, forensic laboratories, and the police.177 They then play a proactive role in implementing local policies and practices to prevent wrongful convictions. Armed with the expertise of correcting root causes of wrongful convictions, CIU prosecutors have used their roles as a platform to educate the public, stakeholders, and the legislature about the ways that the criminal justice system may put innocent people at risk and the various methods to minimize those risks. 178 Perhaps most importantly, prosecutors in CIUs serve as role

173 Id.
174 See CTR. FOR PROSECUTION INTEGRITY, supra note 149, at 7.
175 Co-author Thompson attended this meeting in Tarrant County when she served as a member of the Timothy Cole Advisory Panel for Wrongful Convictions.
176 This was reported by Dawn Moore Boswell, the Chief of the CIU in Tarrant County at the June 28, 2016 meeting of the Timothy Cole Exoneration Review Commission in Austin, Texas, which co-author Thompson attended.
178 The Chief of the Harris County CIU spoke at a symposium on forensic science hosted by the Houston Forensic Science Center in 2015, for example, which was attended by the co-authors.
models for a new generation of prosecutors who are learning what ethical practice means in an office that strives to ensure the integrity of all convictions. As stated by the Chief of the Tarrant County Unit in a 2016 op-ed piece, “The criminal justice system must willingly engage in the sort of self-reflection essential to maintaining the public’s trust and advancing confidence in the processes that lead to convictions.” The author of a national study of CIUs (which he refers to as “Conviction Review Units” or CRUs) made this observation:

Sincere CRUs that conduct open and honest reviews of post-conviction claims of actual innocence stand as a triumph of truth and justice over procedural legal formality, and of collaboration over adversarialism, competitiveness, or bias. As such, they restore faith in our criminal justice system by practicing the highest ideals of truth and justice that are often preached, and often doubted.

B. Houston Removes its Crime Laboratory from the Police Department

As has been typical in Texas, a scandal, this one of enormous proportions, served as a catalyst for another uniquely innovative reform. This time, recurring crises at Houston’s crime laboratory galvanized the community to make a dramatic departure from past practices. Problems of ineptitude, evidence contamination, mismanagement, and fraud at the HPD Crime Laboratory came to light following a series of news reports in 2002. These
revelations led to a state audit as well as independent investigations, including one by former Justice Department Inspector General Michael Bromwich. At least four men were exonerated after spending years in prison in part because of shoddy forensic testing and/or testimony by HPD laboratory analysts. By 2003, the laboratory had earned the unsavory moniker of “worst crime laboratory in the country” from the *New York Times*.

For almost a decade, continual revelations about the HPD laboratory’s shortcomings generated bad press on a national scale. Even the National Academy of Sciences (“NAS”) took note, prominently mentioning the HPD crime laboratory’s failures in its discussion of “errors and frauds” in its landmark 2009 NAS Report.

Fed up with the unceasing negative publicity and desirous to fix the troubled crime laboratory once and for all, then-Mayor Annise Parker, in 2011, embraced a proposal from HPD leadership to remove the laboratory from HPD control. This proposal corresponded with the NAS Report’s repeated call for forensic laboratories to be independent from law enforcement, the achievement of which, the report explained, would foster a scientific research culture, reduce motivational and unconscious cognitive bias among laboratory analysts, and allow laboratory directors, rather than police chiefs, to set laboratory budget priorities. Following negotiations among city leaders, HPD, and the Houston

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184 For a detailed account of how the HPD crime laboratory scandal unfolded over a decade, see THOMPSON, supra note 12, at 205–11.
185 After serving 17 years for kidnapping and rape, George Rodriguez was released from prison in 2004 when DNA testing cleared him of the crime. See *id.* at 3–27. Josiah Sutton, who served three years for a rape he did not commit, was released in March 2003 and pardoned in 2004. See *id.* at 205. In 2008, subsequent DNA testing exonerated two men convicted of rape, Gary Alvin Richard (who spent 22 years in prison) and Ronald Gene Taylor (who served 12 years). HPD laboratory analysts had misrepresented the results of forensic testing at both of their trials. See *id.* at 209.
186 Liptak, supra note 24.
188 NAS REPORT, supra note 74, at 44–45.
189 See THOMPSON, supra note 12, at 211–12.
190 NAS REPORT, supra note 74, at 23–24, 183–85, 190–91. In particular, Recommendation 4 of the NAS Report called for public forensic laboratories to be removed “from the administrative control of law enforcement agencies or prosecutors’ offices.” *Id.* at 24. Not everyone supported the NAS’s call for crime laboratory independence. For example, the National District Attorneys Association (“NDAA”) in 2010 announced its opposition to any attempts to take crime laboratories away from the control of law enforcement. See RESOLUTION IN SUPPORT OF EFFORTS TO STRENGTHEN FORENSIC SCIENCE IN THE UNITED STATES, NAT’L DIST. ATTORNEYS ASS’N (2010),
Police Officers Union, the Houston City Council, in June 2012, approved the creation of the Houston Forensic Science Center, Inc. as a local government corporation tasked with operating an independent laboratory “to provide accurate and timely analysis of forensic evidence and related services.”

The laboratory, now a local government corporation, operates in similar fashion to a publicly-held corporation. Under this unique organizational structure, the corporation is governed by a nine-member board of directors composed of community volunteers who are nominated by the mayor and confirmed by the city council. Given that board members need not be forensic

http://www.ndaa.org/pdf/NDAA_strengthen_forensic_science_resolution_4_10.pdf (stating that the “NDAA opposes proposals that would require crime laboratories to be independent, rather than autonomous, of law enforcement or prosecution agencies where they may be currently located”). Additionally, the International Association of Police Chiefs in 2009 adopted as its official policy that it “is strongly opposed to the removal of crime laboratories and other forensic services from law enforcement agencies.” See Joseph Polski, Forensic Science: A Critical Concern for Police Chiefs, POLICE CHIEF MAG., Sept. 2009, at 24–25.

More recently, an article in the Police Quarterly suggested that separating crime laboratories from police departments could have “serious unintended consequences” by limiting the flow of information between criminal investigators and laboratory analysts. See Edward R. Maguire, William R. King, William Wells & Charles M. Katz, Potential Unintended Consequences of the Movement Toward Forensic Laboratory Independence, 18 POLICE Q. 272, 275, 281–82 (2015). This conclusion overlooks well-documented research showing how scientific conclusions can be adversely affected when investigators share biasing information with forensic scientists. See, e.g., NAS REPORT, supra note 74, at 122–24; see also Ensuring That Forensic Analysis is Based Upon Task-Relevant Information, NAT’L COMM’N ON FORENSIC SCI. (Dec. 8, 2015), https://www.justice.gov/ncfs/file/818196/download.

191 For a description of these negotiations, see THOMPSON, supra note 12, at 212–14.

192 Under Texas law, “a local government corporation may be created to aid and act on behalf of one or more local governments to accomplish any governmental purpose of those local governments.” TEX. TRANS. CODE ANN. § 431.101(a) (West 2011).

193 See Houston, Tex., Res. No. 2012-17 (June 6, 2012), http://www.houstonforensicscience.org/resources/$1S3.d0uqmU$cL.w2mdGZv91afasV.PU.pdf. Although the entity was originally named “Houston Forensic Science LGC, Inc.,” its name was changed to “Houston Forensic Science Center, Inc.” in 2014. MEETING OF BOARD OF DIRECTORS: MINUTES, HOUS. FORENSIC SCIENCE LGC, INC., (2014), http://www.houstonforensicscience.org/meeting/577161cduJ1qSigned.pdf.

194 See HOU. FORENSIC SCIENCE LGC, INC., CERTIFICATION OF FORMATION (2012) [hereinafter CERTIFICATION OF FORMATION], http://www.houstonforensicscience.org/resources/$1SCeq3tCy9$yywgiarboO0S.Sedtx.pdf. In an effort to shield the HFSC and its directors from political influences, a director may not be removed unless he or she has engaged in intentional, unlawful behavior that is related to his or her official duties. THOMPSON, supra note 12, at 214. Since its inception, the HFSC board of directors has reflected both ethnic and general diversity, as well as a variety of experience and expertise. Id. at 215–16. For example, the initial HFSC board consisted of licensed attorneys and academicians with expertise in criminal law and wrongful convictions, business managers, a former judge, a retired assistant chief of police, and a former state legislator. Id. In 2015, Death Row exoneree Anthony Graves was named to serve on the board, the second Texas exoneree to do so. See Jon Schuppe, How Anthony Graves Went from Death Row to Overseeing the Houston Crime Laboratory, NBC
scientists themselves, the corporate governance structure provides for the creation of a Technical Advisory Group (“TAG”) of scientists to advise the board regarding best practices in scientific matters.\textsuperscript{195}

For most of its first two years of existence, the board dealt with transition issues, such as hiring an executive director, engaging Michael Bromwich to conduct a follow-up audit of the laboratory, appointing and meeting with TAG members, inviting community stakeholders to the board’s monthly open meetings, and negotiating with the HPD regarding which assets and divisions of the HPD laboratory would be transferred to the HFSC.\textsuperscript{196} Finally, on April 3, 2014, pursuant to an interlocal agreement with the City of Houston, the HFSC took possession of designated HPD crime laboratory assets and assumed responsibility for the laboratory’s future operations.\textsuperscript{197}

Since that time, the HFSC has hired an exceptional group of qualified staff members to manage and operate the laboratory, including seven scientists with doctoral degrees, and more than 40 with master’s degrees.\textsuperscript{198} The HFSC also expanded the range of forensic services it provides by adding a latent print division in 2014,\textsuperscript{199} as well as a trace evidence division in 2015.\textsuperscript{200} In two years, seven of the eight laboratory divisions have been awarded international ISO accreditation: DNA/biology, controlled substances, toxicology, firearms, trace evidence, digital multimedia, and latent prints.\textsuperscript{201}

\textsuperscript{195} See Certification of Formation, supra note 194.

\textsuperscript{196} See Thompson, supra note 12, at 216–20.

\textsuperscript{197} Id. at 222.

\textsuperscript{198} See Houston Forensic Science Center, 2015 Annual Review 2 (2016) [hereinafter 2015 Annual Review] (on file with authors). In 2016, HFSC staff presented seven papers at the Academy of Forensic Sciences annual convention, the HFSC’s scientific training director was appointed to lead the U.S. delegation to the International Standards Organization’s Technical Committee on Forensic Sciences meeting in the Netherlands, and the HFSC executive director was consulted by the President’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology. See Meeting of Board of Directors: Minutes, supra note 193.


\textsuperscript{200} See 2015 Annual Review, supra note 198, at 5.

Under HFSC leadership, the laboratory has also increased its productivity, reducing backlogs and improving turnaround times. In February 2015, the HFSC made national headlines after eliminating a legacy backlog of approximately 6,600 untested sexual assault kits, some of which dated back to the 1980s. By January 2016, the HFSC had entirely eliminated backlogs in its controlled substances and firearms sections, two huge areas of work for the laboratory. This achievement is even more remarkable given that the HFSC employs the strict Department of Justice definition of “backlog,” which includes any evidence submission upon which testing is not completed within 30 days. Turnaround time for laboratory tests on drugs averaged 13 days in April 2016, whereas drug testing at the old HPD crime laboratory took months, and sometimes years.

Efficiencies and streamlined processes implemented by laboratory managers reduced turnaround times on casework across all laboratory divisions by 25% in 2015 and by 52% to date in 2016.

Another unique feature of the HFSC lies in its commitment to transparency in its dealings with stakeholders and the public. The board meets each month in open session where board members are updated on the status of laboratory operations and where backlogs and other challenges are discussed candidly. Board meetings are videotaped, and the videos are posted on the HFSC’s website, where they can be viewed by all. In the few instances in which complaints have been filed against the HFSC with the TFSC, laboratory management has engaged the City of Houston’s Office of Inspector General.
("OIG") to investigate the complaint and has waived attorney-client privilege so that the resulting OIG reports can be shared with the media, the public, and the TFSC.\textsuperscript{211} Ironically, by virtue of its transparency, the HFSC has occasionally suffered negative publicity simply because it owns up to challenges that are widely shared among crime laboratories, but are rarely, if ever, discussed in public.\textsuperscript{212}

Most impressively, the HFSC is the first crime laboratory in the country to implement blind quality control testing to gauge its analysts' skill levels.\textsuperscript{213} Although laboratory accreditation agencies require laboratory analysts to take periodic proficiency tests,\textsuperscript{214} the usefulness of those tests has been questioned given that analysts know they are being tested.\textsuperscript{215} It stands to reason that analysts will perform more carefully when they are aware they are being evaluated; accordingly, blind testing more accurately measures the quality of an analyst’s


\textsuperscript{212} For example, after its reporter attended a public board meeting, a local television station in April 2016, reported that the HFSC was developing a "creeping" backlog of 333 sexual assault kits (meaning kits not completed by the laboratory within 30 days)—something that the board had been working openly to eliminate for several months. Jeremy Rogalski, City's Rape Kit Backlog Creeping Back Up, KHOU (Apr. 4, 2016, 11:24 PM), http://www.khou.com/news/investigations/citys-rape-kit-backlog-creeping-back/119672065. The next month, county officials were shocked to learn that the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences had developed a backlog of more than 4,600 DNA cases, had tripled its overall backlog in three years, and had 148 sexual assault kits older than 60 days (the county laboratory’s SAK turnaround time goal). See Mihir Zaveri, Harris County Crime Lab Faces Heavy Backlog of DNA Cases, HOUS. CHRON. (May 12, 2016, 10:51 AM), http://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/Harris-County-crime-lab-faces-heavy-backlog-of-7465797.php. The existence of this backlog only came to light after laboratory management applied for a National Institute of Justice backlog-reduction grant for its DNA division. Id.


\textsuperscript{215} See, e.g., Jennifer L. Mnookin et al., The Need for a Research Culture in the Forensic Sciences, 58 UCLA L. REV. 725, 771 (2011) (explaining that implementation of blind proficiency tests in forensic laboratories would “make casework better comport with scientific principles for the production of knowledge”).
regular casework.216 The HFSC added blind quality control samples to its regular workflow in its toxicology, firearms and controlled substances divisions in 2015, and plans to include biology and latent prints by the end of 2016.217 By designing and executing an innovative and ground-breaking blind testing program, the HFSC has received national recognition for its commitment to best scientific practices.218

Nonetheless, the HFSC faces challenges due to some lingering public perceptions that associate the city’s laboratory with incompetence.219 Convincing Houstonians of the laboratory’s independence and transformation has been made harder by the fact that most of the laboratory remains in the HPD building.220 This arrangement leaves much to be desired for another reason as well. The high-rise office space of HPD headquarters was not designed to house a wet laboratory.221 The laboratory space is neither adequate nor large enough to house a forensic laboratory of the size needed by a growing city.

In the past, underfunding was a primary cause of the original HPD crime laboratory disaster, as it has been a cause of problems in forensic laboratories nationwide.222 Today, like most forensic laboratories, the HFSC struggles to obtain adequate funding during a time of shrinking city coffers.223 Thus, while

216 See, e.g., Jonathan J. Koehler, Fingerprint Error Rates and Proficiency Tests: What They Are and Why They Matter, 59 HASTINGS L.J. 1077, 1095 (2008) (stating that proficiency tests should be blind because “knowledge that one is being tested makes examiners more vigilant than when they are performing casework”).


218 See VIEWS OF COMMISSION, supra note 213.

219 For example, in the most recent mayoral election, one candidate made closing the HFSC a major part of his platform, stating that taxpayers should not “prop up” a crime laboratory known for producing “shoddy work.” See Public Safety, BILL KING FOR HOUS. MAYOR (Sept. 11, 2015), http://www.billkingforhouston.com/issues/2015/september/11/public-safety.aspx.

220 Press Release, Hous. Forensic Sci. Ctr., HFSC Changes Corporate Address (Jan. 6, 2016), http://www.houstonforensicscience.org/news/576be971.pdf. Although the HFSC changed its corporate address and moved three of its divisions to a nearby office building in 2016, the Center’s wet laboratories remain in HPD headquarters. Id.

221 Id.

222 See, e.g., Ralph Blumenthal, Officials Ignored Houston Lab’s Troubles, Report Finds, N.Y. TIMES (July 1, 2005), http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/01/us/officials-ignored-houston-labs-troubles-report-finds.html?_r=0 (describing faulty HPD crime laboratory facilities, inadequate and untrained staff, as well as refusal of police chief to spend money to hire additional analysts or fix the laboratory’s problems). See generally THOMPSON, supra note 12, at 37–39 (addressing the scandals in crime laboratories caused by choked budgets).

Houston achieved national acclaim just a few years ago by creating an independent crime laboratory, the more important question may be whether the laboratory will have the wherewithal going forward to build on its early successes.

IV. THE INFRASTRUCTURE IN OPERATION: STATEWIDE SYSTEMIC REVIEWS OF FORENSIC SCIENCE IRREGULARITIES

Having erected an elaborate infrastructure to support the practice of forensic science, the state has been in a unique position to respond to large-scale problems that develop whenever a problem with a forensic discipline is discovered. In addition to its role implementing regulations prospectively to improve the quality of forensic investigations, the TFSC has also examined entire forensic disciplines to determine whether they measure up to today’s scientific standards. When particular areas of forensic science are found to be scientifically invalid, the Commission has partnered with other agencies and groups, including the state fire marshal and the Innocence Project of Texas (“IPOT”), to conduct retroactive reviews of Texas convictions that were based, at least in part, on faulty evidence or testimony. To organize these large-scale reviews of old convictions, the TFSC has mobilized criminal justice stakeholders representing all facets of the forensic science infrastructure to work cooperatively. In the most recent instance, the Texas Criminal Justice Integrity Unit called a meeting of prosecutors (mostly from CIUs), public defenders, innocence project representatives, academics, and others to meet with the General Counsel of TFSC so that the entire group could learn about a forensic science problem and to devise strategies for conducting the large-scale systemic review.

As a result, the TFSC has been described as one of the most important forensic science reform groups in the nation—a remarkable accomplishment given that the Commission’s mission was almost derailed by politics in relation to the Willingham case described above.


225 See generally Hall, supra note 46, at 102–05, 150–55.

226 Id.

227 Id.

228 See infra notes 250–59 and accompanying text.

229 See infra note 46, at 105.

230 See id.; see also Mills & Possley, supra note 40 (discussing the execution of Cameron Todd Willingham on disproved forensics).
After the controversy over the Willingham case, the TFSC decided to ensure that other cases involving questionable arson testimony were reviewed. The TFSC reached out to the state fire marshal’s office, and asked it to re-examine arson convictions where unscientific methods may have been used. After initially contacting 1,085 Texas defendants who had been convicted of arson, IPOT lawyers identified 33 arson convictions that warranted further investigation. By 2014, nine of those cases had been reviewed by an advisory panel of legal and forensic experts assembled by the state fire marshal and IPOT, and five of those nine convictions were found to rely on scientifically unsound arson techniques.

In June, 2016, a district court ruled that the defendant in one of those cases had presented overwhelming evidence of actual innocence, and in November 2016, the Court of Criminal Appeals affirmed this finding and granted relief.

Three years after organizing the arson project, the TFSC implemented a similar re-examination of Texas convictions in which microscopic hair analysis linked a defendant to a crime scene. The TFSC announcement followed the FBI’s decision to review cases in which its examiners testified about hair and fiber evidence, based on concerns that those examiners frequently overstated their findings in ways that benefited the prosecution. The Commission’s decision made Texas the first state to institute a statewide review of convictions

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232 See Hall, supra note 46, at 152.


235 See Brantley Hargrove, Sonia Cacy Found to Be Innocent, TEX. MONTHLY: DAILY POST (June 6, 2016), http://www.texasmonthly.com/the-daily-post/sonia-cacy-found-innocent/.


238 See id.; see also Hall, supra note 46, at 153. In 2015, the FBI admitted that FBI hair examiners had exaggerated their findings in more than 90% of trial transcripts that were reviewed. FBI Testimony on Microscopic Hair Analysis Contained Errors in at Least 90 Percent of Cases in Ongoing Review, FED. BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION (Apr. 20, 2015), https://www.fbi.gov/news/pressrel/press-releases/fbi-testimony-on-microscopic-hair-analysis-contained-errors-in-at-least-90-percent-of-cases-in-ongoing-review.
that involved hair microscopy testimony and reflected the Commission’s concern that many Texas hair examiners had received FBI training.239

To assist with the case review, the Commission again appointed a team of subject matter experts that included crime laboratory, law enforcement, IPOT, prosecution, and public defender representatives.240 The TFSC also created a protocol in conjunction with the Texas Criminal Justice Integrity Unit241 to notify affected parties in cases where problematic hair evidence or testimony factored significantly in the case outcome.242 As of November 2015, the team had reviewed 11 out of 287 cases in which hair evidence positively linked a defendant to a crime scene, and found testimony that amounted to “notifiable error[]” in five of those convictions.243

In another national first, the TFSC, in 2016, recommended that state trial judges should exclude bite-mark evidence as a means of identification in criminal trials.244 The call for a moratorium came after a six-month TFSC investigation concluded that forensic odontology, commonly known as bite-mark analysis, currently lacks an adequate scientific foundation.245 The Commission launched its bite-mark investigation after the national Innocence Project filed a complaint on behalf of Steven Chaney, who had been convicted in 1987 of a Dallas murder based in large part on the testimony of a forensic dentist.246 Chaney’s conviction was set aside in 2015 after the dentist recanted his testimony, describing it in a sworn statement as “scientifically unsound.”247 In its investigation, the TFSC also identified at least 35 other Texas cases for review where bite-mark evidence was utilized.248 While Texas judges are not legally obligated to follow the TFSC’s moratorium recommendation, the Commission’s action attracted national headlines and was described as a “major credibility blow” to a forensic

239  Smith, supra note 237.
240  Id.
241  The Texas Criminal Justice Integrity Unit was created by Judge Barbara Hervey of the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals in 2008 to address problems in the criminal justice system. Jordan Smith, A Dose of Integrity for Texas Criminal Justice, AUSTIN CHRON. (June 27, 2008), http://www.austinchronicle.com/news/2008-06-27/640107/.
242  See FOURTH ANNUAL REPORT, supra note 65, at 17–18.
243  Id. at 18.
245  Id.
246  See Hall, supra note 46, at 104.
247  Id.
248  See Eckholm, supra note 244.
discipline that has been responsible nationally for at least 24 wrongful arrests and convictions. 249

Finally, in yet another statewide reassessment, the TFSC, in 2015, announced it was facilitating a review of thousands of convictions that were based on incorrect statistical interpretations of DNA mixtures—samples that include more than one person’s DNA. 250 The problem with mixtures came to light in May 2015, when “the FBI notified the public that it had identified some errors in the population data used to generate statistical calculations when analyzing DNA cases by crime laboratories around the country.” 251 The changes in the population statistics were not expected to have any material impact on the statistics derived in criminal cases, but in the process of recalculating some old cases, it was discovered that older cases involving complex DNA mixtures had not been interpreted according to currently acceptable standards. 252 In some cases, the use of the proper laboratory protocols could materially affect the statistical conclusion about whether a particular defendant’s genetic material was included in a DNA mixture left at a crime scene. 253

When this problem with the calculation of DNA mixtures came to light, accrediting organizations called on crime laboratories to review old cases to ensure that the miscalculations had not brought about any wrongful convictions. 254 The Texas laboratories, in turn, looked to the TFSC to facilitate such reviews. 255 The Commission brought together the various stakeholders to collaborate on a solution. 256 As a result, forensic scientists, prosecutors, defense lawyers, and judges worked together with the TFSC to develop a plan to examine past cases, notify those affected, and, if appropriate, provide legal representation to those who may have been wrongly convicted. 257 The Texas Indigent Defense Commission supported the case reviews by providing funding for a coordinated team of attorneys “to provide assistance to indigent defendants [] affected by the


252 Id.

253 Id.

254 See Banks, supra note 250.

255 Id.

256 Id.

257 Id.
new guidance promulgated regarding testing and reporting protocols for DNA mixtures.\footnote{E-mail from Jim Bethke, Exec. Dir., Tex. Indigent Def. Comm’n, to Professor Sandra Guerra Thompson (Aug. 11, 2016) (on file with authors).} According to Barry Scheck of the national Innocence Project, these efforts earned Texas the distinction of being the first—and, as of early 2016, the only—state to deal with this enormous issue in a systematic and proactive fashion.\footnote{Id.}

\section*{V. CONCLUSION}

Challenges surely remain, but the creation of an infrastructure of forensic science has already vastly improved the quality of forensic evidence in the state. Texas has produced the largest number of exonerations of any state.\footnote{See Exonerations by State, NAT’L REGISTRY OF EXONERATIONS, https://www.law.umich.edu/special/exonerations/Pages/Exoneration-Map.aspx (last updated Oct. 13, 2016). These numbers grew dramatically in the wake of the discovery of wrongful guilty pleas in drug cases. See supra notes 158–73 and accompanying text.} While sobering, the volume of exonerations also reflects the outstanding progress the state has made in developing the resources necessary to uncover and correct past injustices. From post-conviction prosecutorial discovery, to the appointment of specialized habeas counsel, to the junk science writ and stakeholder cooperation and training, the state has put into place many of the necessary elements for righting the wrongs of the past on a large-scale, statewide basis.

The significant role of the Texas Forensic Science Commission also cannot be overstated. The Commission has not only been integral to implementing statewide systemic reviews of convictions involving flawed science, but it has also elevated the level of forensic science practice in crime laboratories statewide through accreditation, licensing, training, and investigations of irregularities and malfeasance.\footnote{See supra notes 45–69 and accompanying text.} The Commission’s leadership in declaring certain types of evidence to be insufficiently reliable for use in court, as occurred recently with bite-mark evidence,\footnote{See supra notes 244–49 and accompanying text.} has also improved administration of justice in the criminal courts.

Other groups and innovations have also contributed to the overall process of improvement. The Texas Criminal Justice Integrity Unit organizes training programs to implement the needed changes in how forensic science intersects with the legal system, and the group also facilitates stakeholder meetings on particular issues of concern.\footnote{See supra notes 70–78 and accompanying text.} Local innovations such as conviction integrity units within District Attorney’s Offices produce another important
source of expertise and proactive problem-solving. Finally, Houston has taken the lead by transforming its troubled crime lab into one that is independent of law enforcement, transparent in its operation, and excellent in its quality assurance and efficiency. The result is a synergistic relationship in which stakeholders work collaboratively toward the common goals of uncovering wrongful convictions, as well as preventing new ones.

This synergy also makes it feasible for the legislature to begin another round of reforms by forming yet another stakeholder group to study wrongful convictions. Most recently, the legislature established the Timothy Cole Exoneration Review Commission (“TCERC”), a second group named for exoneree Timothy Cole. It began work in 2015, and plans to re-examine what else can be done to improve forensic science, along with other causes of wrongful convictions.

All the judicial training programs and stakeholder meetings appear to have made the judiciary more receptive to prisoner petitions challenging forensic evidence. In June 2016, the Court of Criminal Appeals postpone the impending execution of a man convicted in the death of his two-year-old daughter. The conviction and death sentence largely rested on evidence of “[s]haken [b]aby [s]yndrome.”

In this manner, Texas has created a continuing cycle of legislatively-created stakeholder collaboration leading to state and local innovations and the development of expertise, leading to calls for greater reforms and more stakeholder collaboration. This process has brought about many fundamental

264 See Noah Fromson, Conviction Integrity Units Expand Beyond Lone Star State Roots, TEX. TRIB. (Mar. 12, 2016, 6:00 AM), https://www.texastribune.org/2016/03/12/conviction-integrity-units-expand-beyond-texas-roots/.

265 See supra notes 189–224 and accompanying text.

266 See supra notes 79–89 and accompanying text. The TCERC is made up of 11 members, including 4 legislators, a gubernatorial appointee, and representatives of various criminal justice government bodies and stakeholder organizations, including appointments from the Texas Judicial Council and the Texas Indigent Defense Commission. See Johnathan Silver, Commission Begins Study of Wrongful Convictions, TEX. TRIB. (Oct. 29, 2015, 5:42 PM), https://www.texastribune.org/2015/10/29/commission-begins-work-prevent-wrongful-conviction/. The TCERC was created under the auspices of the Texas Judicial Council, the policy making arm of the judicial branch, and is administratively attached to the Office of Court Administration. Timothy Cole Exoneration Review Commission, TEX. JUDICIAL BRANCH, http://www.txcourts.gov/organizations/policy-funding/timothy-cole-exoneration-review-commission/ (last visited Nov. 3, 2016).

267 See id.


269 Id. The court also put a stop to the use of “dog scent lineup[s],” which were found to be a bogus form of ostensibly scientific evidence. See Winfrey v. Texas, 323 S.W.3d 875, 884 (Tex. Crim. App. 2010).
statutory and local reforms in the practice of forensic science, and governing its use in court.