



Department of Justice

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JUSTICE DEPARTMENT ANNOUNCES NEW ACCREDITATION POLICIES TO ADVANCE FORENSIC SCIENCE

WASHINGTON – Deputy Attorney General Sally Quillian Yates announced today that the Justice Department will, within the next five years, require department-run forensic labs to obtain and maintain accreditation and require all department prosecutors to use accredited labs to process forensic evidence when practicable. Additionally, the department has decided to use its grant funding mechanisms to encourage other labs around the country to pursue accreditation.

The new policies arose out of recommendations made by the National Commission of Forensic Science (NCFS), which was established to advance the field of forensic science and make suggestions to the Attorney General on how to ensure that reliable and scientifically valid evidence is used when solving crimes. The Attorney General made the decision to implement several of the commission’s recommendations last week and the Deputy Attorney General, who serves as co-chair of the NCFS, announced their adoption at a meeting of the commission today.

“The department believes that accreditation is one of the most important tools for ensuring that forensic science is practiced in a reliable, scientifically rigorous way,” said Deputy Attorney General Yates. “Accreditation provides valuable oversight by ensuring that someone outside the participating laboratory has confirmed that the lab is following their required procedures. We support accreditation and we want to expand accreditation as widely as possible.”

Though department forensic labs at ATF, DEA and FBI are already accredited, the new policy will ensure that, by 2020, those labs will have to maintain that accreditation. Also by 2020, department prosecutors will be required to use accredited forensic labs when it is practicable. The Executive Office for U.S. Attorneys (EOUSA) has been directed to develop guidance that will ensure the successful implementation of this new policy in the field.

The new policy does not apply to digital forensic labs. Instead, the Deputy Attorney General has asked the NCFCS to develop separate recommendations on accrediting of labs that conduct digital forensic work, given the difference in the practices of forensic analysis of digital evidence.

As a result of the commission's recommendations, the Attorney General also has directed two changes to the department's grant funding in an effort to encourage and support state and local forensic labs in the process of becoming accredited. First, solicitations for both Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant funding and Paul Coverdell Forensic Science Improvement Grant funding will be re-drafted to make clear that applicants can use this money to seek accreditation, because labs have not always used these funds to seek accreditation. Second, relevant discretionary grant programs at the Office of Justice Programs will be modified to give preferences to labs that will use the money to obtain accreditation. These applicants will get a "plus factor," increasing their likelihood of getting the money they need.

Accreditation assesses a forensic lab's capacity to generate and interpret results in a particular forensic discipline and helps to ensure an ongoing compliance to industry and applicable international standards. An independent accrediting body assesses and monitors the quality of the lab's management system by examining factors that include staff competence; method validation; appropriateness of test methods; calibration and maintenance of test equipment; testing environment and quality assurance data. Accreditation is one way to increase the quality of work and reducing the likelihood of errors.

Based on further recommendations by the NCFCS, the Deputy Attorney General also announced that the department will help to establish an interagency working group aimed at bringing higher levels of scientific rigor and reliability to the field of medico-legal death investigation (MDI). The department has asked the White House's Office of Science and Technology Policy to help convene the working group, which would focus on a broad range of MDI issues. Though the department does not conduct its own MDI— which is typically handled by state and local agencies – it believes an interagency group will help accomplish the goals of the NCFCS in strengthening the MDI field.

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