



NIRCL Annual Report 2020

Introduction

Due to restrictions on large gatherings during the Coronavirus pandemic, this Annual Report is presented to member agencies for review and comment in lieu of the Annual Meeting typically held in June. Please contact Executive Director Phil Kinsey (pkinsey@nircl.org, (406)493-8083, (847) 362-0676 x102) if you have any questions or comments.

Overall, the laboratory is in a very sound position. Laboratory membership continues to grow. The laboratory welcomed the Romeoville and Evergreen Park Police Departments and the Rosemont Department of Public Safety this year. The laboratory now provides forensic services for over 1.6 million Illinoisans. With the addition of these agencies the lab was able to hire a forensic science trainee for the Firearms section. The hiring not only bolstered the staffing of one of our smaller lab sections, it also addressed medium-term laboratory succession plan needs.

The pandemic has had several impacts on the laboratory. To accommodate shelter-in-place orders from Governor Pritzker, the laboratory was largely shut down between March 23rd to April 6th. One or two employees at a time were allowed into the facility to monitor refrigerators and freezers and to monitor and maintain laboratory instruments.

As the lab gradually resumed operations, two scientists and one or occasionally two administrative staff were allowed in the lab at any one time. A sneeze guard was installed in the evidence intake area and evidence submission appointments were scheduled on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Daily disinfection of high use, general lab areas was implemented. The staff maximized the work that could be conducted from home (updating protocols, policies and procedures), and worked in shifts to safely increase laboratory work. At the end of May, staffing levels at the laboratory were increased to two scientists per laboratory section as shift work continued. Masks were required when staff were up and about the laboratory and when social distancing could not be maintained. Health screening checks were implemented which includes documentation of a temperature check and affirmation of a lack of COVID-19 related symptoms before beginning work at the lab.

Between March 15 and June 15, 2020, the laboratory received 62% of the cases received in the same period in 2019 and as such has been able to maintain reasonable case backlogs. Turn-around times were impacted slightly, but with courts largely closed, this has not resulted in any downstream negative impacts.

The pandemic has also spurred some laboratory improvements. With expectations for decreased opportunities for travel for training, funding from those budget lines were redirected to purchasing basic laptop computers for employees to use to perform work from home. With these computers, staff log onto their workstations through an encrypted virtual private network. Improved use of video conferencing has allowed the staff to continue to provide information about lab testing in its Quarterly Presentation format. The laboratory is developing paperless options where applicable for the improved ability to analyze, interpret and review data remotely.



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The laboratory looks to return to full staffing as conditions and orders allow. Increasing work from home and maximizing flexible schedules will reduce the number of staff in the lab at any one time. Laboratory staff will continue documenting health screening checks and masks will be required whenever staff are up and about the lab and when they are speaking to one another, regardless of the distance or physical barriers between them. Evidence intake hours will expand but will continue to be by appointment only so the lab can limit the number of people in the evidence intake area at a time. Agency representatives will continue to be required to wear face masks while at the laboratory. Agencies will be notified when operational changes are implemented.

Considering New Agencies for Membership

When the lab receives inquiries about joining the membership, prospective members are directed to basic information on our website and asked to provide recent information about evidence submissions as information about the expected needs of the agency is gathered. This information along with updated UCR data are reviewed and discussed with laboratory staff, the Executive Board and the prospective member to ensure that the laboratory can maintain the high level of service expected of our current member agencies. Once all are assured the laboratory can move forward with the additional work, the new agency will be admitted by recommendation of laboratory management, vote of the Executive Board and execution of the laboratory Intergovernmental Agreement.

Although alternative funding schemes are occasionally considered, the existing mechanism of assessing fees works well. Per vote of the Board of Directors in 2018, the laboratory is expecting its last increase in fees to \$1.42 per population plus the flat \$3,000 facility fee on May 1, 2021. 2020 Census data is anticipated to be available in March of 2021 and if received in time, will be incorporated into member agency assessment fees. If not, that information will be used for assessments in the following year.

Budget

The budget attached to this Report was approved by the Board of Directors at the April 3, 2020 video conference meeting. The lab is appropriately funded.

Revenues are expected to increase 12.4% and expenses are expected to increase 11.3%. Revenues are bolstered by the addition of the Evergreen Park PD and the Rosemont DPS, interest earned on CD investments of reserve funds and most significantly by increases to federal grant allocations. Increases in expenses are made up of employee-related impacts and a few major operational expenses. Employee-related expense increases come from an additional FTE and from increases in salary and adjustments in benefits. As the budget was written, health insurance cost increases were expected to be low, a high estimate of 5% was included for budgeting. However, there is uncertainty introduced into this estimate due to the pandemic. The primary operational expenses are related to those increases of grant funding and the timing of the spending those funds on purchases of instruments which are subject to constraints from the granting agencies.

The laboratory has slowly been adding to its strategic reserves of capital in keeping with recommendations for small non-profit organizations. That said, it is unclear how decreases in



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revenues for the municipalities of our member agencies may impact future membership at the lab. The lab will consider all options available to maintain a strong work force to adapt to unforeseen challenges and to continue the outstanding forensic services our member agencies rely on.

Accomplishments

The laboratory continues to maintain its accreditation through the American National Standards Institute National Accreditation Board (ANAB) even as standards are continually honed and tightened. This is the primary responsibility of Assistant Lab Director and Quality Assurance Manager Mark Milford and his Quality Team of Michelle Thomas and Gary Lind, although each lab employee plays a critical role in maintaining the high quality of laboratory analysis.

One very large project that was completed this year in the DNA section was the implementation of DNA mixture interpretation software known as STRMix. Nationally, there has been a large effort to standardize the interpretation of mixed DNA profiles. This was accomplished last October and provides another tool in the toolbox of our DNA analysts to increase the utility of DNA evidence.

The laboratory continued to add to its slate of training offerings by including a one-day hands-on Footwear and Tire Track evidence class. A latent print class was offered for the second time this year and we have provided basic information about the different laboratory sections in our three quarterly presentations to date. These presentations are now offered by video conference and are targeted at new Evidence Staff, Crime Scene Technicians and new Detectives, but are also accessible to the broader criminal justice community as well as the public. Lastly, lab staff can provide discipline specific trainings as occurred for representatives of a small number of agencies using the Tinley Park training facility.

Ongoing projects

At this writing the lab is in the middle of an Invitation for Bid (IFB) to purchase an instrument known as a Triple Quad that will allow for the quantitation of THC in blood for DUI samples. The cost for this instrument is about \$300,000, about \$200,000 of which will be paid for using grant funding. This is new technology to the laboratory and will take many months of internal training and validation work before it is brought on-line.

As of June 1, our new Firearms Examiner Trainee joined the laboratory. The typical training period for a forensic firearms examiner is two years. Given that most of this training will be provided in the lab, the time spent by our qualified examiners training our new hire is time spent away from casework. The lab is applying to the National Firearms Examiner Academy to provide 19 weeks of firearms training for her in Maryland and Washington DC. This training is at no expense to the laboratory and will free up our existing staff to focus on casework.

With the aforementioned purchase of laptops for work from home, laboratory staff continue to improve and increase their use of this option to maintain productivity, limit the number of staff in the lab at any one time and help minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission in the laboratory setting.



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As was reported during the last Annual Meeting, the laboratory encountered changes in the requirements on our drug destruction project. This year, the lab will likely be repackaging all drug evidence submitted for destruction. We anticipate making the destruction run in August and will provide details for the new process when they are available.

After the first few months of the new *Cannabis* legislation, there has been no great movement toward the need for establishing a quantitation of THC to distinguish hemp from *Cannabis*. In fact, in a recent report <https://www.dispatch.com/news/20200525/ohio-crime-labs-to-distinguish-marijuana-hemp> out of Ohio in which the State Lab system implemented a quantitation procedure, the response from the legal community indicated that quantitation would not change the way those cases would be handled in court. The lab will continue to monitor this situation in Illinois.

Long Term Goals

In the next year or two, the lab will be looking to purchase PreLog software from Porter Lee Corp to upgrade customer access to laboratory reports, the status of casework in the lab and the enable the pre-entry evidence submission information for immediate upload at the laboratory.

The lab is in the early stages of discussions with companies that can provide high throughput imaging of existing case files. This will reduce the need for the off-site storage of laboratory documents and greatly improve disaster recovery options. Regardless of whether this project gains traction, current efforts to move to a more paperless system will be impactful.

In addition to the necessary continuing scientific education and training of staff, the laboratory will continue to provide training opportunities for employees to improve their interpersonal and professional skills. The training the lab has been taking advantage of allows staff scientists the opportunity to learn about a broader range of considerations and skills needed in the workplace beyond their primary focus of casework. As several of our staff are approaching retirement age in the next five years, these opportunities allow for employees to consider possible career advancement.

Communication and Outreach

The laboratory continues to employ a variety of approaches to maintain good communication with our user agencies and their representatives. These approaches include direct emails, quarterly reports, in-person trainings (though these may be limited for the near future), video meetings and continued management of website content.

Casework Metrics

Casework metrics are published in the Quarterly Reports which are available at www.nircl.org. As mentioned earlier, the lab has seen about 60% of the cases between March 15 and June 15 this year compared to last year. The lab expects submissions to increase slowly as the restrictions surrounding the pandemic relax. Submissions and casework metrics have been analyzed weekly since March and allow for ready adjustments to staffing as casework demands change.



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Forensic Task Force and Commission

In August of 2019, Governor Pritzker formed a Forensic Science Task Force to explore ideas and make recommendations to improve forensic services by Illinois' public laboratories and to make recommendations for the formation of an Illinois Forensic Commission and to provide guidance for a proposed role in forensic oversight to improve transparency. Director Kinsey was invited to participate on the Task Force and was recommended to be included on the Forensic Commission. Commissions have been implemented in 11 other states and have led to increased transparency of forensic operations and provided an avenue for independent reviews of concerns about laboratory testing and practices. The Illinois Forensic Science Commission will likely add some additional work on laboratory administration, but it is not anticipated to be overly burdensome.

Thank you

The work of the laboratory could not be done without a significant amount of effort by people and organizations outside of the lab. Thank you to Executive Board President Steve Husak, Vice President Jamie Dunne, Treasurer George Carpenter, Secretary Marc Hornstein and Member-at-Large Steve Balinski for providing ready access to sage advice on a wide variety of matters.

Thank you to Chief Kreis and Commander Levicki of the Vernon Hills Police Department, Chief Guenther of the Mundelein Police Department, Chief Husak and Sergeant Tony Grunder of the Lake Zurich Police Department, Chief Balinski of the Kildeer Police Department, Kildeer Chief Village Officer Michael Talbett, Sergeant Bill Divine of the Tinley Park Police Department and Deputy Chief Dan Jungles and Sergeant Jeremy Zdzinicki of the Will County Sheriff's Office for offering help, space for training and meetings and for support of the laboratory above and beyond what one would hope for but what we at the lab have come to expect as standard operating procedure of the member agencies of the laboratory. What a great group of people to work with! Thank you!

Special Acknowledgements

To Lake County Assistant State's Attorneys Jeff Pavletic and Ken LaRue for always being available to discuss, shed light on and resolve complicated matters and for continued support of the laboratory. Thank you, Jeff! Thank you, Ken!

To Evidence Custodian Phil Lorenz of the Arlington Heights Police Department for evidence submissions that are organized, limited to the best and probative evidence and for clear communication in making requests of the laboratory. His efforts help make the lab more productive for all agencies. Thank you, Phil!

Finally, to the employees of the lab, nothing gets done without your hard work and dedication to our organization and because of your hard work and dedication, everything you do is done well! Thank you all!