



NATIONAL COMMISSION ON FORENSIC SCIENCE

NIST
National Institute of
Standards and Technology
U.S. Department of Commerce

Views of the Commission Accreditation Program Requirements

Subcommittee
Accreditation & Proficiency Testing

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Commission Action

The Commission voted to adopt this Views Document on September 12, 2016, by a more than two-thirds majority vote (90% yes, 10% no, 0% abstain).

Note: This document reflects the views of the National Commission on Forensic Science and does not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Justice or the National Institute of Standards and Technology. The portion of the document directly labeled “Views of The Commission” represents the formal Views of the Commission. Information beyond that section is provided for context. Views documents do not request specific action by the Attorney General, and thus do not require further action by the Department of Justice upon their approval by the Commission. The National Commission on Forensic Science is a Federal Advisory Committee established by the Department of Justice. For more information, please visit: <https://www.justice.gov/ncfs>.

Overview

The National Commission on Forensic Science (NCFS) had previously adopted a policy recommendation on the Universal Accreditation of all Forensic Science Service Providers (FSSPs). Accreditation helps to ensure both ongoing compliance to industry standards and continual improvement of a FSSP’s operations. Accreditation assesses a FSSP’s capacity to generate and interpret results. Accreditation criteria are based on accepted industry standards and applicable international standards. Accreditation uses these criteria to assess the quality of the FSSP’s management system by examining, among other things, staff competence, training, and continuing education; method validation; appropriateness of test methods; traceability of measurements and calibrations to national standards; suitability, calibration, and maintenance of test equipment; testing environment; documentation, sampling, and handling of test items; and quality assurance of data, including reporting results and proficiency tests.

Although universal accreditation can demonstrate ongoing compliance with industry best practices, promote standardization, and improve the quality of services provided by FSSPs

nationally, it is recognized that strengthening the accreditation programs will also strengthen the FSSPs and forensic science overall. Accrediting bodies in forensic science must meet the requirements of ISO/IEC 17011 to gain Mutual Recognition Arrangement (MRA) Signatory Status with the International Laboratory Accreditation Cooperation (ILAC). Accrediting bodies may need to exceed those requirements to achieve consistency and strengthen the industry overall. The views below include proposed changes to accrediting body structure and accreditation programs, including requirements and standards for FSSPs that may assist in further strengthening the forensic industry overall.

Professional accreditation bodies focused on the forensic sciences have existed for more than 30 years, and variation exists between how those accrediting bodies implement and assess FSSPs to existing standards. Examples of this variation include: 1) standards that allow accreditation bodies to perform on-site assessments at different intervals, 2) use of supplemental standards specific for forensic science, and 3) compliance with ISO/IEC 17011. The recommendations in this document were not intended to provide specific accreditation program activities but instead to recognize good practices that already exist and the benefit that may come from increasing those practices.

Views of the Commission

It is the view of NCFCS that the overall accreditation of FSSPs could be strengthened by, at a minimum, compliance with ISO/IEC 17011 for all accrediting bodies offering services to FSSPs. In addition, due to the critical nature of the work performed at FSSPs, it is recommended that accrediting bodies adopt/incorporate the following requirements into existing forensic science accreditation programs.

- Shorten the time period between assessments.¹
- Require surveillance visits every year a FSSP does not have an assessment.
- Require that surveillance visits of FSSPs include a review of accredited technical areas.
- Ensure technical assessors are appropriate for the categories of testing for which they are conducting assessments. (Assessors should have recent work as an analyst in the discipline.)
- Provide continuous training and feedback to assessors.
- Develop standard sampling plans for case record review and case observations/witnessing that consider an FSSP's volume of casework and number of analysts. These sampling plans should include targeted and random sampling of case records.
- Establish/develop specific additional requirements for FSSPs to meet:
 - A percentage of technical reviews;
 - A percentage of blind re-examinations;
 - A stipulation for in-person monitoring and transcript review by FSSP personnel with a mandated frequency;
 - Method validation to include both external sources/studies of the overall performance and reliability, such as reference to published best practices, general acceptance in the scientific community, and internal studies of appropriateness and performance; and

¹ ISO/IEC 17011.

- Requirements for proficiency testing plans (e.g., number of external per year/cycle) that consider an FSSP's volume of casework and number of analysts.
- Incorporate standards approved by recognized sources such as ISO Technical Committee on Forensic Science (ISO TC 272), Standard Development Organizations (SDOs), and the Organization of Scientific Area Committees for Forensic Science (OSAC), where applicable and relevant.
- The Department of Justice (DOJ) should seek and review aggregate data issues/nonconformities from all assessments of FSSPs from each accrediting body. Anonymity and confidentiality should be maintained, as the purpose of the data review is to identify trends in forensic science that may need to be addressed by Federal, state, or local forensic science entities. It is recommended that this data be provided to the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST)/OSAC for analysis, action, and standard development.

These recommendations as well as existing requirements should be developed based on guidance from OSAC and other technical groups and be agreed upon and implemented consistently by all accreditation bodies.