I am pleased to present to the Membership the National Forensic Science Technology Center (NFSTC) 2003 Annual Report.

The events of the past year were of considerable significance for the NFSTC, culminating in the decision to separate the fee for service activities into a new independent corporation.

Michael G. Sheppo
President

OVERVIEW

The Federal budget for FY 2003 included $3.0 million in support for programs provided to public state and local crime laboratories under the NFSTC’s Cooperative Agreement with the National Institute of Justice (NIJ). The proposal submitted to the NIJ for programs covered by the directed funding was based upon reports from two focus groups. The first assembly was convened from the member organization representatives at the time of the annual NFSTC membership meeting in April. The second consisted of the Directors of the American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors (ASCLD), which met in early May.

Both reports emphasized the importance of the programs delivered under the Cooperative Agreement that make a contribution to the unmet demand for training that exists in the crime laboratory community. In view of the background of the participants, it is not surprising that the ASCLD group added to this their strong support for the DNA auditing program.

The major NIJ supported activities delivered during the year reflected the same priorities. A second Drug Academy and the first of two planned DNA Academies were the highlights on the training side. In reference to DNA Audits, fifty-seven of the approximately 150 forensic DNA testing facilities in state or local crime laboratories requested and received an audit in 2003.

Specific DNA programs comprised a portion of the way that we satisfied our core commitment of services to state and local crime laboratories. Other programs ranged from preparation of validation kits to make it easier to bring methods for DNA and accelerant residue testing into service to the facilitation of access to reference sources such as the American Society for the Testing of Materials (ASTM) standard methods on forensic science. Additionally, the Gunsights™ firearms reference CD was distributed and the quality of detector dog training was improved through the NFSTC’s efforts.
At the membership meeting last year, we announced the goal set by the Board to separate the NIJ and non-NIJ parts of the traditional NFSTC organization. Ultimately, the Board decided that the best way to do this was to create a new not-for-profit membership corporation, Forensic Quality Services, Inc. (FQS). Documents were filed in October and the new company, FQS, began operations in January 2004. ISO accreditation services are also provided through the Forensic Quality Services – International (FQS-I) as a business unit within the FQS.

The NFSTC has developed and matured over the years. This became apparent when the ASCLD, which established the NFSTC in October 1995, contracted with FQS to provide its administrative services. We are pleased to be involved in this support role, which was facilitated by the separation of the FQS from the NFSTC.

Demand for FQS services remained high in all areas throughout the year. The FQS-I achieved considerable progress in its evaluation by the NACLA for recognition as an accreditation body.

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**PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS**

**NIJ Funded Programs**

**Forensic Academies**

A second Drug Academy was conducted during the first half of the year. A resource guide for the Drug Academy has been presented to the NIJ and the curriculum and lesson plans can be made available to interested laboratories. The final report includes modifications resulting from our experiences in the 2002 offering. The modifications resulted in a program that is more focused. It does, however, retain the high degree of academic rigor agreed upon in the discussions with the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), which kindly permitted us to draw heavily on their established drug analysis course. This means that the curriculum does not fully address the needs of those laboratories seeking a technical training program that allows the rapid induction of a new hire. Nevertheless, it does provide students with a strong knowledge and skills base to deal with the many challenges that they will face during their careers as drug chemists. We were especially pleased with the comparative evaluations conducted by the Illinois State Police, which were reported at the 2004 American Academy of Forensic Sciences meeting.
The first of two scheduled DNA Academies was presented in the second half of the year. The format followed that of the Drug Academies, but in this case, the value of the academic rigor of the program was even more apparent. The theory component included material that carried academic credit hours and, together with the statistics workshop, ensured that the graduates met the educational requirements of the National Quality Assurance standards.

**DNA External Audit Program**

The National Quality Assurance Standards for DNA Testing require a compliance audit each year and external participation in the audit at least every other year. Planning and funding (whether by paying a contractor or repaying a peer laboratory in kind) is a drain on laboratory resources. Utilizing our external audit program permits the laboratory to dedicate its resources to testing. The combination of sound program management and selected auditors who have completed the FBI DNA audit class provides the additional benefit of consistency to the process.

Fifty-seven laboratories were audited in 2003, which is a high proportion of the laboratories requiring an external audit in that year. The program was rated in May by an ASCLD – NFSTC focus group as by far the most valuable service that they received.

Comments from some of the laboratories audited in 2003:

“…both auditors did a professional job that I cannot think of any way to do the job better. They more than satisfied my expectations. Our laboratory not only benefited from their audit, we also learned from them. Thank you for sending them.”

“The auditor’s extensive preparation made for a very smooth audit. His organization of the documentation and the audit process enabled us to work in a most efficient manner. He was a real pleasure to work with and I enjoyed working with the other members of the team.”

“The auditor kept all members of the audit team and the staff of the lab aware of any non-compliant items. He made efforts to update everyone on a daily basis of where we were in the process. He compared the action to the standard; a very good auditor.”
ASCLD Meeting Support

For the second consecutive year, we were pleased to be able to support the Annual ASCLD Crime Laboratory Management symposium. The symposium theme for 2003 was “Managing Change – Embracing Tradition” and over 400 delegates enjoyed a challenging professional experience.

ASCLD-LAB Program Support

During 2003, the NFSTC provided direct and indirect support to the ASCLD/LAB accreditation program valued at over $150,000. The indirect support was comprised of a variety of activities designed to enable laboratories to review their operations against benchmark standards. This provides a valuable tool to laboratories setting out on the accreditation path for the first time. Implementation was accomplished through on-site audit workshops (provided through FQS) and continued uptake of the Laboratory Auditing CD-ROM delivered to the NIJ in 2002 (with over 1,000 now in circulation). Direct assistance was given through a positive response from the NFSTC to a request from the ASCLD/LAB to develop a Quality Manual template. The draft of this template was applied by us in the challenging environment of providing assistance to the Houston Police Department laboratory as it responded to the very public criticism of its operations. The final product was given to the NIJ for review at the end of 2003. Finally, NFSTC’s support to the ASCLD annual symposium included the annual meeting of the delegate assembly and the October board meeting of the ASCLD/LAB.

AFQAM Meeting Support

The NFSTC has watched with pleasure the growth of the Association of Forensic Quality Assurance Managers. We are strong supporters of the principle of individuals networking to improve the quality of forensic analysis. This principle was translated into practice through assistance to delegates attending the 2003 AFQAM meeting, as we provided in 2002.

Reference Materials

The NIJ supported a forensic science summit in 1997. The resulting report described several areas that the meeting identified as having critical needs. One of these areas was reference materials. A follow up study, conducted through the Office of Law Enforcement Standards, confirmed that there was a strong demand for a wide range of reference resources, ranging from standards for toxicology to library collections.
The NFSTC responded to the identified needs by incorporating these examples into our program for 2003 and beyond:

- Providing on request, the original and update copies of the Gunsights™ Firearms Reference program
- Providing the ASTM E30 forensic science subcommittee approved standard methods to all state and local crime laboratories
- Establishing a cooperative program with the National Center for Forensic Science to develop and provide a Fire Debris Validation Kit for use by laboratories seeking to institute or update their fire debris analysis procedures
- Designing and planning the compilation of a DNA Validation Kit for those laboratories still seeking to introduce or update their DNA analysis procedures
- Providing seed money to what is currently the National Clearing House for Science, Technology and the Law for the development of a resource guide on laws and case precedents as they affect every major area of forensic science

**DNA for Officers of the Court**

DNA continues to prove its value as a tool for justice. As technology in the laboratory advances, so too must the ability of users, including officers of the court, to understand DNA’s strengths and limitations. For that reason, the NIJ funded the NFSTC to manage a program for the development of an interactive CD-ROM to be used by officers of the court to learn the fundamental scientific principles behind DNA testing and their application in the justice system. A working group of respected members from key communities was established through the Office of the Director of the NIJ to address the task. This group has defined the content of the CD and subgroups are working through the content creation and review of the multi-media resource being produced by our Instructional Technology unit.

**Digital Evidence in the Court**

Our Instructional Technology group is working on a similar project in the field of Digital Evidence. In this project, the theme is constructed around a mock trial. The desired outcome is a tool that incorporates the full range of instructional technology capabilities, thus ensuring that the users of this new and sometimes challenging area of forensic science are able to best utilize digital evidence.
**Cost Recovery Programs**

**Academic Programs**

The NFSTC fulfilled its agreed upon contract with the University of Florida and presented UF with a cutting edge suite of lesson plans that make full use of our graphics and other media rich content. The contract ended on December 31 and the day-to-day provision of the program is the responsibility of the university. In contrast, the NFSTC has a strong on-going commitment to program delivery in our cooperative relationship with the University of South Florida. The undergraduate Introduction to Forensic Science class for criminal justice students remains highly popular. We are now exploring certificate-based continuing professional development programs, beginning with DNA for Attorneys.

**Consultancies**

The consultancy programs were strong in 2003. Several laboratories received assistance with auditing and with setting up their DNA laboratories to comply with the National QA Standards. Possibly the most significant event was the request from the Houston Police Department for assistance with their response to the very public criticism of their crime laboratory’s standards of operation. Our review presented the department with an action plan, which was accepted by the City and resulted in a major overhaul of the management of the laboratory.

**DNA Accreditations**

The NFSTC’s role in the accreditation of private DNA laboratories continues to receive recognition by government and industry. We were somewhat surprised that some public laboratories sought certification from the FQS audits despite the existence of the free service from the NIJ funded program. Examination of the circumstances revealed that the requests were being made either by laboratories seeking their first compliance audit (and which required a physical certificate to demonstrate compliance) or laboratories that were among the leaders in quality assurance and wished to have an independent audit in the year between the mandatory external audit.
ISO Accreditations

2003 was an excellent year for our ISO 17025 program. Considerable progress has been made towards our NACLA recognition. There has also been substantial growth in the number of FQS-I accredited laboratories, primarily in the DNA sector. Encouraged by the stability of the service and by the consistently positive feedback from our clients, the NFSTC board encouraged the new FQS corporation to promote its programs more widely. It is our belief that we have an excellent product and that the entire forensic science community will benefit from our entry into the accreditation business.

Unfortunately, the language that we used in early drafts of our promotional materials offended some of our friends and colleagues. We regret that our attempts to illustrate the strengths of our service could have been read as a negative commentary on the excellent contributions to quality made by many in the crime laboratory community over the years. This was not our intention. The draft brochures were immediately withdrawn and have been replaced. We offer our sincere apologies to those who were, or could have been, affected.

We also received a complaint from the ASCLD/LAB referencing what they regarded as inappropriate inferences to their program contained in material on our website. We referred their comments to the NACLA to consider in the context of NACLA’s code of ethics. The NACLA made a few suggestions to modify the website’s content, which we were pleased to accept and implement.

Comments from FQS and FQS-I customers:

“Our auditor was fair, impartial and provided helpful suggestions to improve quality. Very polite. Non-intimidating and very personable. Thorough in his evaluation with the goal to help us improve.”

“All members of the audit team were friendly and professional. They performed their duties well and provided valuable assessments and comments to aid us in improving our operations.”

ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

The NFSTC’s Board of Directors formed a new not-for-profit corporation, Forensic Quality Services, Inc. (FQS) in October 2003. All fee for service work previously performed by the NFSTC was transferred to FQS in January 2004, including the FQS-I (ISO) accreditation programs.
The move was made in response to the need to have a clear delineation of government funded services provided at no cost to support state and local crime laboratories, from services provided to the forensic science community on a cost recovery basis. This simplifies our administration, relieves FQS of a potential high overhead cost penalty, and further separates the ISO accreditation services from other related activities thereby making the organizational structure more acceptable to the NACLA.

The FQS is physically located in a discrete section of the NFSTC building and pays the NFSTC the full costs of its accommodation. FQS has its own support services and permanent staff. While it will take some time for the new identity to become fully established, we are certain that the separation is in the best interests of all stakeholders.

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**FINANCIAL STATEMENTS**

The audited balance sheet and statement of income and disbursements are distributed as received from the auditors.

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**LOOKING TO 2004**

The organizational changes should have a positive impact on the NFSTC as well as on the FQS. Our NIJ-funded programs look as strong as ever. The clarity of function of the corporation as a provider of federally funded services to state and local crime laboratories and their user stakeholders makes planning easier. While the outcome is not known at this time, we are pleased by the request from the AFQAM to join the membership of the NFSTC.

Although the FQS is now a separate business, it was established as a membership corporation with the NFSTC as the sole founding member. A strong link remains, and we believe this link will have a positive effect on both organizations. The NFSTC is excited about the coming year and pledges to provide the very best quality support to the forensic science community throughout the year.

Largo, FL
April 3, 2004