

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### UH Law Center's Thompson calls for forensic science reform in new book 'Cops in Lab Coats'

**April 2, 2015** – To protect the interests of justice against potential conflicts of interest, forensic labs across the country should be removed from the auspices of law enforcement agencies and be made independent, University of Houston Law Center (UHLC) Professor Sandra Guerra Thompson argues in her released new book. “Cops in Lab Coats, Curbing Wrongful Convictions through Independent Forensic Laboratories” is published by Carolina Academic Press.

As a former prosecutor who now serves on the board of directors that oversees Houston's new, independent crime lab, Thompson knows more than a bit about how crime laboratories best function.

Before joining UHLC in 1990, Thompson, director of the school's [Criminal Justice Institute](#), served for two years in the New York District Attorney's Office as both a trial and appellate attorney. In 2011, Mayor Annise Parker named her to the nine-member board of directors which managed the transformation of the HPD's Crime Laboratory into the newly-created [Houston Forensic Science Center](#).

The change followed years of turmoil and negative publicity over Houston's police crime lab. Stories of botched tests, massive backlogs, malfeasance, and cheating on proficiency exams had plagued the police department for nearly a decade.

“Interestingly, the police department chief executives – the crime lab director and the executive first assistant police chief –decided to adopt a solution proposed by the National Academy of Sciences in 2009,” Thompson said. “They decided to remove the laboratory from within the police department.”

It turns out that Houston's problems weren't unique. Across the country, there had been numerous public outcries over crime labs, which are meant to provide objective scientific analysis, being run by law enforcement agencies. Critics said there was too much pressure, either direct or indirect, on such labs to skew the science toward making a prosecution.

In 2009, the National Academy of Sciences released a [report](#), based on a multi-year study of crime labs and medical examiners offices across the country. Among its recommendation was more independence between crime labs and police departments.

"The Houston Police Department decided they had been trying very hard for long enough to have a great lab, and it just wasn't working. And so they went to the mayor with a proposal to remove the lab from their auspices. The mayor developed a proposal to do that, and the city council approved it," Thompson said.

The city created the Houston Forensic Science Center as a separate local government corporation. "It's a special vehicle created by the Texas Legislature for this kind of enterprise, where you want an operation to have some kind of autonomy but it's still essentially a public corporation," she said.

After setting up shop, the board and its executive team (hired through national searches) set about the cumbersome process of transferring the "assets" of the former crime lab to the new one. In April 2014, the Houston Crime Lab officially ceased to exist and the Houston Forensic Science Center was born.

"Crime labs (in the past) haven't focused as much on scientific research but more on law enforcement and getting convictions and being helpful to the police and prosecutors," Thompson said. That can be through both conscious and unconscious biases and on outside pressures that are brought to bear on the scientists doing the analysis, she said.

"So the new administration of the new Houston lab is determined to reorient the culture so that analysts are focusing on science, and they know their job is getting the science right, regardless of what the outcome is," she said.

When she was appointed to the board, Thompson said, she wanted to make sure she was as prepared as she could be for her new role. That led her to shift the focus of her research, which had been on wrongful convictions based largely on eyewitness testimony, to understanding the issues involved with forensic sciences.

“What my book does is to try to help lawyers, judges, policymakers, and the general public better understand why it is possible that a crime lab could completely get the science wrong. What are the issues, how widespread are the issues, and what are some of the solutions,” she said.

The book’s first chapter lays out the saga of one of the most egregious cases involving the former Houston Crime Lab -- that of George Rodriguez, who was sentenced to 60 years for a 1987 sexual assault r based largely on blood test evidence and hair analysis, both of which were botched.

Only after the [Innocence Project of New York](#) became involved and a single hair was found in the case file – after it was believed that all of the biological evidence in the case had been destroyed – did Rodriguez get his day in court. New DNA testing ultimately proved his innocence. Rodriguez was released from prison in 2004 and later sued the city of Houston. A federal jury ultimately awarded him \$5 million in civil damages.

In later chapters, Thompson lays out the issues from a national perspective, referring frequently to the findings of the 2009 National Academy of Sciences, but in a way that speaks to a wider audience.

“I show that it’s really a national crisis,” she said. “I talk about the science. What do we know about the various forensic disciplines, are they reliable? The NAS does a discipline-by-discipline analysis. It’s a very scientific report, so what I try to do is make it easily accessible to lawyers and others, (including) policymakers,” she said.

Thompson said she hopes her book will help lawyers, both prosecutors and defense attorneys, better understand the issues.

“As a former prosecutor, I firmly believe that prosecutors don’t want to wrongly convict someone. I don’t think they’re going to want to put on invalid testimony,” she said. “But they have to understand the limits of the science to be sure that the testimony they’re putting on is correct, is valid, and is not overstated. And the defense lawyers also need to be able to guard their clients from overstatement.”

Thompson said that Houston, with its new independent crime lab, and Texas, one of only two states (the other being New York) to create a forensic science commission, are actually “ahead of the game” in making the use of forensic science in criminal proceedings more valid.

In fact, she said, Texas is the first state so far to allow inmates to go back to court to have their cases reheard if it’s shown that the scientific evidence used at trial was invalid.

“It’s really helping people who do these kinds of innocence investigations to go back and review cases and get innocent people out,” she said.

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