



Legislation Text

File #: 23-0433, **Version:** 1

Department: Institute of Forensic Sciences

Department Head/Elected Official: Luis A. Sanchez, M.D., Executive Director & Chief Medical Examiner

Regular or Supplemental RCA: Regular RCA

Type of Request: Grant

Project ID (if applicable): CJD #1748018

Vendor/Entity Legal Name (if applicable): N/A

MWDBE Contracted Goal (if applicable): N/A

MWDBE Current Participation (if applicable): N/A

Justification for 0% MWDBE Participation Goal: N/A - Goal not applicable to request

Request Summary (Agenda Caption):

Request by the Institute of Forensic Sciences for approval to submit an application to the Office of the Governor/Criminal Justice Division for grant funds in the amount of \$276,257.85, with no required match, for the FY 2024 Paul Coverdell Forensic Sciences Improvement Grant Program.

Background and Discussion:

The Medical Examiner service continued to see significantly higher numbers of death cases in 2022 compared to pre-pandemic levels, resulting in a 30% increase in cases requiring toxicology testing over that of 2019. The number of opioid related deaths in 2022 is estimated to be similar to 2021, however there was a significant shift of more of those involving fentanyl and less involving heroin. Our Forensic Toxicology laboratory is responsible for detecting toxic drugs and determining their quantities when detected. While more efficient methods have been developed or adopted by the laboratory for the detection and quantitation of these drugs, the continued higher caseload has prevented post-mortem toxicology testing from being completed within our 45 day goal. Quick turnaround times in toxicology are required so medical examiners can complete autopsy reports within the 60-day timeframe required by accreditation.

Case submissions to the Drug Chemistry laboratory decreased 12% in 2022 compared to 2021 but are still ~15% higher than that of 2020. Additionally, the laboratory continues to see a large increase in the total number of items submitted per case, ultimately requiring more testing. While the number of opiate-positive results in drug chemistry was lower in 2022 due to a lower number of case submissions, opiate positive cases are still nearly 3 times higher than seen in 2019. Our goal is to complete 95% of priority seized drug cases, such as those where a suspect has been placed in jail, in 15 days. Continued higher number of case submissions and especially the high number of item submissions challenge our ability to complete that goal.

The Trace Evidence laboratory, while not impacted directly by opioids, also has a persistent backlog. This program seeks to address both opioid and non-opioid work in a concerted approach that provides for overall backlog reduction. HCIFS receives substantial support from Harris County with sufficient funding for normal operations; however, on occasion we need additional funding for unexpectedly high caseloads or for upgrading or expanding lab equipment. This program

has been indispensable in obtaining funds for these purposes.

We seek funds for overtime compensation and associated fringe benefits for analysts performing opioid-related analyses in Drug Chemistry and Toxicology. A total of \$38,588.57 is requested for the 15 staff members of Drug Chemistry and \$81,533.65 for 32 analysts and technicians employed in Toxicology. Overtime funds of \$5,635.63 for non-opioid related Trace Evidence analysis is also requested for the 2 members of that section. Total cost of overtime compensation and fringe benefits is \$125,757.85.

In another part of our backlog and turnaround time reduction initiative, we are requesting \$15,000 for the outsourcing of infrequent and time-consuming analyses on non-opioid medical examiner toxicology cases. This will allow the laboratory to focus on higher throughput testing and avoid backlogs and reduce turnaround time.

Aging instrumentation and appliances are a concern for most laboratories. While we have the benefit of service agreements to augment repair costs, after a certain age, most instruments are no longer covered by such contracts or supported by vendors. As a result, when the instruments become inoperable, the downtime could be considerable given that parts and/or qualified service may not be available from third parties. To that end, we wish to replace a hydrogen generator (opioid-related - \$36,000) and UV-Visible Spectrophotometer (opioid related - \$17,000) for Drug Chemistry. We also wish to purchase a UV-Visible Spectrophotometer (non-opioid-related - \$17,000), two LC/MS/MS Mass-Hunter software licenses (opioid-related - \$6,500), two refrigerators (opioid related - \$11,000), and one freezer (opioid related \$7,000) for Toxicology.

Finally, we seek \$41,000 in consumable laboratory supplies for use in non-DNA forensic casework that will be split between Drug Chemistry and Toxicology (\$39,000 opioid-related) and Trace Evidence (\$2,000 non-opioid related).

Expected Impact:

Our program aims to provide assistance in four keys areas: (1) Purchase of scientific instrumentation to maintain and improve methods in drug chemistry and toxicology; (2) outsourcing of specialty Toxicology cases; (3) overtime compensation for Forensic Analysts in Drug Chemistry, Toxicology and Trace Evidence; and, (4) purchase consumables to be expended in parts (1) and (3).

Alternative Options:

There are few, if any, alternate options available for this program.

Alignment with Goal(s):

- ☒ Justice and Safety
- ☐ Economic Opportunity
- ☐ Housing
- ☐ Public Health
- ☐ Transportation
- ☐ Flooding
- ☐ Environment
- ☐ Governance and Customer Service

Prior Court Action (if any):

Date	Agenda Item #	Action Taken
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N/A	N/A	N/A
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Location:

Address (if applicable): 1861 Old Spanish Trail, Houston, TX 77054

Precinct(s): Countywide

Fiscal and Personnel Summary			
Service Name	Paul Coverdell Forensic Sciences Improvement Grant Program, FY2024		
	FY 23	FY 24	Next 3 FYs
Incremental Expenditures (do NOT write values in thousands or millions)			
Labor Expenditures	\$	\$125,758	\$
Non-Labor Expenditures	\$	\$150,500	\$
Total Incremental Expenditures	\$	\$276,258	\$
Funding Sources (do NOT write values in thousands or millions)			
Existing Budget			
Choose an item.	\$	\$	\$
Choose an item.	\$	\$	\$
Choose an item.	\$	\$	\$
Total Current Budget	\$	\$	\$
Additional Budget Requested			
Grant	\$	\$276,258	\$
Choose an item.	\$	\$	\$
Choose an item.	\$	\$	\$
Total Additional Budget Requested	\$	\$	\$
Total Funding Sources	\$	\$276,258	\$
Personnel (Fill out section only if requesting new PCNs)			
Current Position Count for Service	-	-	-
Additional Positions Requested	-	-	-
Total Personnel	-	-	-

Anticipated Court Date: January 31, 2023**Anticipated Implementation Date (if different from Court date):** October 1, 2023**Emergency/Disaster Recovery Note:** Not an emergency, disaster, or COVID-19 related item**Contact(s) name, title, department:** Robin Alewine, Grant Analyst, Institute of Forensic Sciences**Attachments** (if applicable): Application, Court Order, Resolution