

Organizational Policy for Crime Laboratory Staffing and Quality Assurance Processes

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Abstract

Members of the forensic science discipline serve a unique role in the criminal justice system with involvement in activities ranging from evidence collection, crime lab analysis and courtroom testimony. Accordingly, organizational policies must address a broad range of responsibilities such as hiring criteria, administrative practices, procedure development, training, evidence handling, quality control, analysis protocols, testimony, proficiency testing, personnel qualifications and security. Two of the more critical aspects of organizational policy involve the hiring process and quality assurance standards. The importance of the hiring process is underscored by the limited pool of qualified applicants for specialized positions that are part of the forensic science discipline. However, it is not enough to simply hire the best employees. Given the importance of the forensic analysis process it is imperative that quality assurance standards be implemented for all areas within a crime laboratory. Accordingly, the purpose of this research paper is to briefly discuss the specific policies that would be implemented within a crime laboratory in order to ensure that qualified individuals are hired and quality assurance standards are beyond reproach.

Organizational Policy for Crime Laboratory Staffing and Quality Assurance Processes

A forensic scientist is responsible for conducting an accurate and impartial analysis of physical evidence that can often be the deciding factor in determining the innocence or guilt of an individual. Accordingly, policies that guide the hiring process and the development of quality assurance standards are of the utmost importance. In general terms, a policy differs from a procedure in that a “policy” is established to identify critical activities and provide general guidance on how to handle a given issue or complete a process. A policy does not provide step process in the completion of a given activity in the manner that is provided by a procedure, process or standard (HR and Training, 2005).

Hiring of Qualified Individuals

The quality of the work generated by a crime laboratory is directly related to the performance and capabilities of the staff. Specific to the forensic science discipline the hiring policy must, as a minimum, address the education, experience, abilities, and background of a potential employee. The policy must also adhere to human resource (HR) requirements for a given organization to meet all legal requirements relative to discrimination and other applicable issues.

The employment policy must be designed to ensure that individuals who are hired have the academic qualifications or work experience necessary to ensure that they are knowledgeable of fundamental scientific principles needed to conduct forensic analysis. The desired requirements for a given position would include a bachelor’s degree in the forensic sciences. The hiring manager may also consider relevant work experience in the forensic science discipline for the laboratory position. However, all academic credentials and work experience claimed by the applicant must be verified through official transcripts and previous employers.

The policy requires that all potential employees successfully pass a standardized pre-employment test battery designed to assist in selecting the most qualified applicant for a given position. The purpose of this testing process is to screen potential employees to ensure that those considered for a position possess the cognitive attributes and personality traits necessary to perform assigned duties within the crime lab effectively. Caution must be exercised in the selection and development of test processes to ensure that the results are not used to discriminate based on race, color, sex, nationality, religious affiliation, physical disability or age (EEOC, 2010). Additionally, a potential employee must successfully pass a pre-employment drug test to assist in preventing drug abuse from occurring in the workplace.

The employment policy must also address the manner that criminal history, background and credit checks are used in the hiring process. The primary purpose of these checks is to determine whether an individual is deemed, to be honest, and ethical in their personal life and professional endeavors. The benefit to the organization from conducting checks in this manner is an increase in the overall quality of employees, reduction in the potential for workplace violence, and limiting financial losses associated with employee dishonesty.

Quality Assurance Standards

The basic intent of a crime laboratory quality assurance program is to provide processes designed to: maintain the integrity of evidence; conduct analysis using validated and reliable methods; provide accurate documentation and reporting of work activities; monitor court testimony provided by crime lab personnel; perform random blind proficiency testing; and conduct independent case reviews (Laboratory Management, 1994). The result of the quality assurance process will enhance the court's confidence that the analysis performed by personnel within the crime laboratory is being completed in an accurate and reliable manner.

The failure to maintain the quality of any one area of the crime lab has an adverse impact on the reputation of the crime lab as a whole, to include each individual within the organization. Accordingly, the manner in which the quality assurance program is implemented requires strict adherence to policy guidance designed to ensure that activities within the crime laboratory are conducted in a manner that adheres to commonly accepted ethical and analytical processes. To achieve this goal, policy guidance includes the requirements for the certification of forensic analysts by a nationally recognized entity and accreditation of the crime laboratory.

To ensure that the crime lab produces scientifically accurate and unbiased results, the policy includes requirements for blind validation of testing activities as well as random independent auditing of testing activities. The intent of requiring blind validation and independent auditing is to provide a method of ensuring the accuracy of results and to provide a manner to resolve identified discrepancies. Therefore, to ensure that quality and accountability are the norm and not the exception, it is critical to maintain an ongoing intrusive and aggressive independent review process for work activities performed within the crime laboratory.

Summary

The development of compressive policy guidance for the operation of a crime lab is only the beginning of the process. The implementation of organizational policies must be ingrained within the culture of an organization and supported from the highest level of the management structure down to each employee. Policies must also be reviewed on a continuing basis to ensure continued applicability and identify policies that are in need of revision. Only when policy guidance is adequately maintained and supported can the activities performed within the crime lab effectively serve the needs of the criminal justice system.

References

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