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Crime labs under fire

By Robert Tanner
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

A series of scandals, probes and new questions about old convictions are casting doubt on one of the foundations of the modern criminal justice system — the crime lab.

Over the last year, laboratories at the FBI and in several states — Arizona, Florida and Texas among them — have come under scrutiny, including criminal investigations, findings of mismanagement and accusations of falsifying evidence. So far, only a few convictions have been overturned.

Lab directors defend their work and their standards. But critics say the flurry of problems show the need for independent oversight, and for labs to be separated from the criminal justice departments where most are based.

"There's major things that need to be changed. When people are dealing with someone's life, they need to be more careful, be more sincere," said Carol Batie of Houston, whose son Josiah Sutton was convicted of rape, largely on DNA evidence. A new analysis of that same evidence has now excluded Sutton.

He got a second chance after problems at the Houston Police Department lab sent evidence in hundreds of cases back for retests. Sutton was released on bond and the district attorney has recommended a pardon.

It's essential that the labs' work can be trusted, agree critics and forensic scientists who run tests on DNA, blood, fingerprints, clothing and more.

Still, problems keep cropping up: — In Phoenix, lab technicians mistakenly overstated the likelihood that DNA linked suspects to crimes in nine criminal cases, including a homicide case that brought a conviction and two other investigations in which suspects pleaded guilty.

— In Florida, a state crime lab worker in

Orlando falsified DNA data.

— In Kansas, mislabeling of a blood sample 12 years ago let a man go free who now has been charged in a string of rapes and a 2002 murder.

— In Oklahoma, Montana and West Virginia, new findings have called old testimony by forensic experts or lab managers into question.

— In Houston, an audit of the DNA section of the police lab found undertrained staff, a leaky lab that may have contaminated evidence, and mishandling of evidence.

"Labs are run by humans, beings," said James Alan Fox, criminal justice professor at Northeastern University.

"Essentially, the management of labs may not be as foolproof as the science of forensics."

Better standards, better funding, better management — all may be necessary to ensure lab results don't wrongly convince juries of guilt, Fox said.

"They operate like the wild west," said Peter Neufeld, defense attorney and one of the founders of the Innocence Project at the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law in New York, a group behind many of the DNA-based exonerations across the country in recent years.

Neufeld runs down a list of problems: Standards are voluntary and set up by crime lab directors themselves, too few labs follow the standards, and the overwhelming majority of labs are too closely connected to police departments or prosecutors.

"For too long, it's been run by people who are law enforcement, as opposed to people who are scientists," he said.

Noted Ken Melson, U.S. attorney in eastern Virginia: "No one wants a Houston in their state. The best corrective, said Melson, Ferrara and others, is for every lab to be accredited under a system set up by crime lab directors, so their practices are inspected and evaluated by independent inspectors.

“Essentially, the management of labs may not be as foolproof as the science of forensics.”

— James Alan Fox
criminal justice professor

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Sunni Cranfill named Miss Texas

FORT WORTH, Texas (AP) — Sunni Cranfill, Miss Amarillo Area, was crowned the new Miss Texas on Saturday night.

She will represent Texas in the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City, N.J., in September.


Cranfill, 23, a senior journalism major at West Texas A&M University in Canyon with emphasis on broadcasting, succeeds Miss Texas 2002 Lisa Dalzell, who was Miss Lake O' The Pines.

The blonde, wearing a champagne-colored evening gown, mouthed "Oh my God" upon hearing she was this year's winner. Miss Fort Worth Morgan Matlock was named first runner-up.

Second runner-up was Stephani Stokes, Miss Lubbock third runner-up was Megan Gilbride, Miss Humble-Kingwood and fourth runner-up was Kristin Porter, Miss Metrocrest.

Cranfill attended Arkansas-Little Rock from 1998 to 2002, graduating with honors in 1999 from Hooks High School.

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By THE A

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Easter opens restaur

By Melissa THE BAT

Overlooking t Presidential Libr new restaurant an opened at Easter making traveling and convenient fo Sully's Landin News and Gift March, have bee and have gotten p from employees said Kim Sutp director for adm "It has been t we had fresh bev for our passenger Sully's Landi am, every day p.m. The restaura public and parkin first hour. "With the grea eat lunch and wa Sutphen said. " hamburgers and as well as a blu everyday." Sutphen said t great for passeng long delay or a