



STATE OF RHODE ISLAND

OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL

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Peter F. Neronha
Attorney General

April 24, 2025

The Honorable Robert E. Craven, Sr.
Chairman
House Committee on Judiciary
State House, House Lounge
Providence, RI 02903

Re: HB 6229: State Crime Laboratory Commission

Dear Chairman Craven and Members of the House Judiciary Committee,

I write today to express my support for HB 6229, legislation that would consolidate the two separate entities that divide the management of laboratories supporting the state's criminal justice system to create a unified state crime laboratory housed within the Office of the Attorney General.

Currently, the Rhode Island State Crime Laboratory (RISCL) operates under the University of Rhode Island, while the Center for Forensic Sciences is housed within the Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDOH). My Office drafted this legislation following a request from Dr. Marc Parlange, President of the University of Rhode Island, and Armand Sabitoni, acting in his capacity as Vice Chair of the University of Rhode Island Board of Trustees, and other conversations with House and Senate leadership, to assist in the relocation of the RISCL for the reasons set forth below. I have no strong desire to house a unified state crime laboratory within this Office, but no other state agency – including the Rhode Island State Police through the Department of Public Safety (DPS)¹ – has stepped up to take it on. And significant reform is unquestionably necessary.

The current structure of Rhode Island's criminal justice forensic laboratories is a national outlier and does not align with best practices in forensic and other evidentiary sciences. The divided structure of these entities – along with an academic institution's oversight of a core state criminal justice function – is inconsistent with the efficient and professional management of a state crime lab. Following thorough research into various states' crime laboratories and meetings with various crime laboratory directors across the country – including those in Connecticut, Vermont, Ohio, Massachusetts, and Virginia – it is evident that the RISCL and Rhode Island forensic science system more broadly is badly flawed. The structure is grossly inefficient and lacks the necessary accountability and oversight by criminal justice agencies that is necessary to ensure excellence in all aspects of our forensic science infrastructure: from the timely processing of evidence, to appropriate investment in personnel and infrastructure, to

¹ On at least one occasion, I spoke with Rhode Island State Police Colonel Darnell S. Weaver regarding whether DPS would be interested in taking oversight and ownership of the Crime Lab. The Colonel demurred.

consistently reliable and accurate analyses. No agency is more invested in ensuring that these goals are met than the Attorney General's Office. The significant structural flaws in our current system likely contributed to two highly publicized breakdowns that occurred at the RISCL² and the Forensic Drug Chemistry Laboratory³ in recent years.

In the vast majority of states across the country, a unified state crime laboratory is located within the Department of Public Safety or the Attorney General's Office (or another state's equivalent of those agencies). Criminal justice administration and public safety are critical parts of my job as Attorney General, and the Office has a vested interest in ensuring that the state's crime lab is appropriately managed, sufficiently resourced, and produces scientifically sound analyses. The current structure is problematic because the entities charged with oversight do not have missions aligned with, or expertise in, criminal justice or the justice system.

Consolidating Rhode Island's two crime lab entities is not a novel concept. Indeed, there have been at least six significant attempts over the last thirty years to create a unified crime laboratory in Rhode Island. The most recent effort was led by the University of Rhode Island and supported by the forensic science community throughout the state. And there's a reason this idea has historically garnered such broad support: a unified lab could better capitalize on federal grant opportunities and make better decisions regarding allocation of such funds and prioritization of investments in technology, for example; a unified lab would be able to appoint a full-time quality assurance manager that oversees the entire laboratory; and a unified lab would more efficiently and effectively process the mountain of criminal justice evidence handled by our state forensic labs each year.

Some will argue that this legislation misses the mark in removing the State Crime Laboratory Commission. But their criticism is misplaced. The majority of state crime labs do not have crime laboratory oversight commissions – including our neighbor state of Connecticut, which runs a gold standard crime laboratory and relies upon professional staff for quality assurance. Indeed, according to the Department of Justice, the best crime laboratories in the country rely on the expertise and knowledge of their directors and staff to effectively carry out the mission of supporting the criminal justice system. And volunteer oversight commission structures are neither consistent with best practices nor with Rhode Island's experience in ensuring effective crime lab oversight. The systemic problems facing the RISCL run much deeper than can be addressed by expanding the Commission, as proposed by other legislation introduced this session, including HB 5664. Those proposals do nothing to require oversight of RIDOH's forensic science laboratories or the medical examiner. They do not require the appointment of properly credentialed experts in fields relevant to forensic science. And, frankly, a Commission that meets quarterly with no funding, staff, or relevant expertise does not go very far towards addressing the underlying issues discussed above.

By contrast, this legislation contains requirements for reporting and national accreditation that would mandate regular assessment by independent, professional experts. Having said that, we would not be opposed to continuing the discussion regarding a re-imagined and re-constituted Commission that could provide outside, neutral oversight and expertise to ensure that the State Crime Lab, wherever it is housed, adheres to national best practices and provides outstanding service to all stakeholders in the criminal justice system. We welcome such continued conversation.

Finally, I note that we recognize that implementing this proposed legislation will require a significant undertaking and collaboration with RIDOH, URI, and our law enforcement

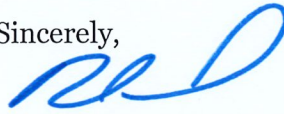
² [RI crime laboratory under scrutiny as some forensic work is suspended.](#)

³ [RI drug lab has false positive, sparking review of over 300 cases.](#)

partners. We also recognize that it cannot happen overnight and will require a period of transition. We are open to further revisions of this legislation that will push out the effective date and will outline a transition period, to ensure continued orderly operations of the laboratories.

It is evident that Rhode Island stands alone in our approach to forensic science – and not in a good way. A unified state crime laboratory is essential to the proper functioning of our state criminal justice system. After more than 30 years attempting to fix this national outlier in our State – after avoidable high stakes errors and missed federal funding opportunities – the people of Rhode Island deserve better. For these reasons, I urge the Committee to pass this legislation, and I welcome the opportunity to continue to work on this proposal to address any concerns or questions the Committee may have.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'P. Neronha', is positioned above the printed name.

Peter F. Neronha
Attorney General