The Houston Forensic Science Center is hosting a symposium as part of its celebration of National Forensic Science Week. The symposium will include two panel discussions designed to bring attention to some of the biggest issues in the forensic community today. The first panel includes an exoneree who faced two execution dates for six murders he didn’t commit. It will address the national issue of drug exonerations resulting from faulty field testing and laboratory backlogs and how this impacts minority communities. This panel will discuss the practical and ethical challenges faced by attorneys representing individuals arrested on drug charges based on faulty field tests and addresses the new procedures established to prevent wrongful convictions in the future. The second panel will tackle the national rape kit backlog, the challenges laboratories face when eliminating the backlogs and the obstacles rape victims face due to these hurdles. This panel will also provide guidance for attorneys handling cases involving DNA evidence.

Debbie Smith, a sexual assault survivor, will share her story as the keynote speaker. Ms. Smith is the founder of H-E-A-R-T, Hope Exists After Rape Trauma, and the 2004 federal act that provides forensic laboratories with funding to battle DNA backlogs, is named for her.

Tom Allen, HFSC’s general counsel, will provide a morning overview of the Michael Morton Act, its benefits and challenges.
Debbie Smith is a mother of two grown children, with seven grandchildren and has been married to Rob for over 44 years. She was a stay at home mom in 1989 when a masked intruder entered her home, abducted, robbed and repeatedly raped her in the woods behind her home in Williamsburg, Va. For six and a half years this crime went unsolved until DNA made a cold hit on a repeat offender who was serving time for other crimes. Since the end of a lengthy and drawn out trial, Debbie has become a crusader intent on helping other victims and trying to prevent others from becoming victims. She has appeared on several TV shows including 60 minutes, Oprah, John Walsh, Jane Pauley, etc. She has been interviewed in numerous national magazines and newspapers. Federal law with Debbie’s name attached (the Justice For All Act of 2004) passed and was signed by President G. W. Bush, which will provide funding to eliminate the backlog of untested rape kits, to train first responders such as police, EMTs and nurses and it will standardize rape kits nationwide. This five-year law was passed again for an additional five years as the Debbie Smith Act in 2008. Debbie speaks at conferences all over the U.S. and the world in an effort to help others. She is the founder and CEO of H-E-A-R-T, Inc., a non-profit foundation established to aid victims of sexual assault.

Rob Smith retired from the Williamsburg Police Department as a Lt. Detective with more than 25 years of service. He graduated Summa Cum Laude from St. Leo’s University with a BA in Criminal Justice. He retired in order to help Debbie with H-E-A-R-T and serves as president/treasurer for the foundation. Together with Debbie he speaks at conferences bringing his police experience together with his experience as a secondary victim and the husband of a rape survivor. His primary focus is in training first responders how to better understand the mindset of a victim of sexual assault. He has served on the board of directors for the local Williamsburg area battered women’s shelter, AVALON, currently for the local SANE program, and on the Colonial Area Taskforce on Domestic and Sexual Assault.

Both Debbie and Rob are past members of the IACP (International Association of Chiefs of Police) and OVC (Office of Victims of Crime) national advisory committee for establishing a new victim’s service model for law enforcement. They were both members of the board for NREP (National Rape Evidence Program) which raised funds to help with the cost of testing rape kits until the federal grant program started. They were part of the advisory board that established the Virginia Victim/Witness Academy. Debbie was appointed by one governor of Virginia (Kane) to the Criminal Sentencing Commission, by the next governor (McDonnell) to the Virginia Criminal Justice Services Board and most recently by current Governor McAuliffe to the Juvenile Justice Advisory Board. To date they have presented in 34 different states, Canada, Croatia, South Africa and Australia.

Reauthorization, which will renew and strengthen federal and state forensic programs. University of Virginia, Miss Bjellos is currently helping RAINN to pass legislation including the Justice for All Act.

Anthony Graves

Anthony Graves spent nearly 20 years in prison, more than half of it on death row, for six murders he did not commit. Mr. Graves was released from prison and exonerated in 2010. Since then, Mr. Graves has traveled the country and the world sharing his experience and helping with innocence projects. Mr. Graves established a foundation designed to promote fairness and effect reform in the criminal justice system.

Tom P. Allen

Tom P. Allen is general counsel of the Houston Forensic Science Center. Mr. Allen received his J.D. in 1983 from the University of Texas, where he was Managing Editor of the Texas Law Review. He clerked for a federal judge, learned the law trade at two large firms and one spectacularly failing bank, and co-founded McDaniel & Allen, PC, a commercial litigation shop. His past clients include an “in-kind” creditor of a Ponzi scheme, a defendant in the dénouement of Jerry Jones’ business divorce and a former senior officer of Enron Corporation. Seeking calmer pastures, in 2007 Mr. Allen joined the City of Houston’s Legal Department, where he serves as a First Assistant City Attorney.

Blair Bjellos

Blair Bjellos is the senior policy associate for the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN). Formerly, Miss Bjellos spent several years on Capitol Hill, most recently as the director of the Congressional Victims’ Rights Caucus (VRC) for Congressman Ted Poe (R-TX). As the VRC director, Miss Bjellos worked on several bipartisan laws to address victims’ rights and sexual violence, including the Sexual Assault Forensic Evidence Reporting (SAFER) Act of 2013, which supports rape kit testing, and the Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act of 2015, a comprehensive response to modern day slavery in the United States. A graduate of the University of Virginia, Miss Bjellos is currently helping RAINN to pass legislation including the Justice for All Act Reauthorization, which will renew and strengthen federal and state forensic programs.

Dr. Stacey Mitchell

Dr. Stacey Mitchell is the administrative director for Harris Health System’s Risk Management/ Patient Safety and Forensic Nursing Services. Dr. Mitchell has more than 20 years of experience as a forensic nurse and has been a key contributor to the stakeholder group that came together to assist with the elimination of Houston’s backlog of 6,663 sexual assault kits. In 2015, the International Association of Forensic Nursing awarded Dr. Mitchell the Virginia Lynch Award. This is the highest award the association bestows on individuals who have made exceptional contributions to forensic nursing.

Dr. Kevin Strom

Kevin J. Strom, PhD, is an expert in law enforcement responses to community violence, the causes and correlates of interpersonal violence and interagency coordination in response to terrorism. Dr. Strom has led numerous law enforcement–related studies for the National Institute of Justice, including a project on which RTI partnered with the DC Metropolitan Police Department to examine the feasibility of using data mining to generate useful information from “suspicious activity reports” in 911 calls for service data. Dr. Strom was the principal investigator for the local research component of the Department of Justice-funded Project Safe Neighborhoods initiative, working with state and local law enforcement agencies to address firearm-related violence through targeted data collection and analysis. He also serves as associate project director for RTI’s contract with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration to administer the National Forensic Laboratory Information System.