



TACIR

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on Intergovernmental Relations

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Commission Members

FROM: Cliff Lippard
Executive Director

DATE: 12 June 2025

SUBJECT: Senate Bill 2877/House Bill 2961 (Capacity of Crime Labs in Tennessee)—
Draft Report for Review and Comment

The attached draft commission report is submitted for your review and comment. In response to concerns about the effects of evidence backlogs and turnaround times, Senate Bill 2877 by Senator Kyle and House Bill 2961 by Representative Hardaway in the 113th General Assembly aimed to direct the commission to study the feasibility of establishing a crime lab in Shelby County. The bill passed in the Senate but not in the House, and commission member Representative Williams requested in May 2024 that the commission undertake a broader study to evaluate the feasibility and need for establishing additional crime labs throughout the state, including the existing labs' capacity to process evidence efficiently and consideration of potential locations for any new crime labs to optimize resources.

Increasing crime lab capacity involves increasing the number of staff available to conduct tests, the lab space available for those staff to work, or both. In the last few years, the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation (TBI) has increased its testing capacity by hiring additional scientists, and turnaround times for some testing categories have improved. But other categories have not improved, and on top of that, demand for testing continues to increase.

Lack of physical lab space is now the primary factor constraining the capacity of TBI's labs. The Comptroller's 2024 performance audit identified workspace expansion as the next significant challenge in TBI's Forensic Services Division because adding more staff means needing more space to accommodate them. In March 2024, TBI completed a real

estate strategic plan that outlines future expansion goals, including expansion of the Jackson lab, renovation and expansion of the Nashville lab, plans for a new, larger lab in Knoxville to replace the current one, and the establishment of a smaller lab in Chattanooga. According to TBI, the additional capacity will aid it in reducing turnaround times to its goal of 8 to 12 weeks for all testing. Although funding for the future projects in Nashville, Knoxville, and Chattanooga has not yet been secured, the expansion of the Jackson lab is planned to begin in 2025.

Ultimately, without confronting the constraint of limited lab space, the state's efforts to further improve forensic evidence processing and public safety will be hindered. **The commission recommends that the state increase crime lab capacity in each grand division, in line with TBI's 2024 real estate strategic plan, specifically by expanding the existing Jackson and Nashville labs, replacing the existing Knoxville lab with a larger lab with capacity for firearms testing, and adding a smaller, focused lab in Chattanooga for drug-related evidence and toxicology. Additionally, the commission recommends that TBI and the city of Memphis enter into an agreement for a firearm analyst in the Jackson lab dedicated to Memphis cases and that expansions at the Nashville lab focus on the most overburdened disciplines—like forensic chemistry and toxicology.**

While the state undertakes long-term expansion of its facilities, there are other practices to be considered that could help reduce backlogs, expedite accurate forensic results, and improve public safety while TBI expands its labs, **the commission recommends that**

- **TBI continue to look for areas to improve efficiency using external process improvement methods, as recommended by the National Institute of Justice;**
- **the General Assembly amend DNA testing laws to allow rapid DNA implementation at law enforcement booking stations; and**
- **the state support resource-sharing partnerships for training local law enforcement agencies across the state through funding and technical assistance.**