

The Regional Toxicology Liaison Project

A REVIEW OF THE INAUGURAL YEAR

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Over the last few decades, there has been a sharp increase in drug-impaired driving across the United States. According to the Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, 12.6 million Americans reported driving under the influence of marijuana or other illicit drugs in 2018. Despite efforts over the years of forensic toxicology laboratories to parallel the efforts and needs of law enforcement, various barriers prevent laboratories from providing the critical testing and support required. In response to the issues, in 2021, the Society of Forensic Toxicologists, Inc. (SOFT) was awarded the Regional Toxicology Liaison (RTL) Demonstration Project cooperative agreement by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). The cooperative agreement aims to benefit state toxicology programs through increased support, communication, resources, criminal justice system coordination, and improved data reporting. The project includes three Toxicology Liaisons that support states in NHTSA regions 5, 7, and 9 (<https://www.nhtsa.gov/about-nhtsa>). The focus of the RTLs is to assist with training, collaboration, standardization of testing across state laboratories, and data harmonization to understand the scope of the drug-impaired driving problem.

The three individuals chosen to serve as the RTLs are:

1. Dr. Sabra Jones, NHTSA Region 5 (below) – Sabra is a Forensic Toxicologist and board-certified as a Diplomate by the American Board of Forensic Toxicology (ABFT). She has vast experience in public sector forensic toxicology laboratories and in academia.



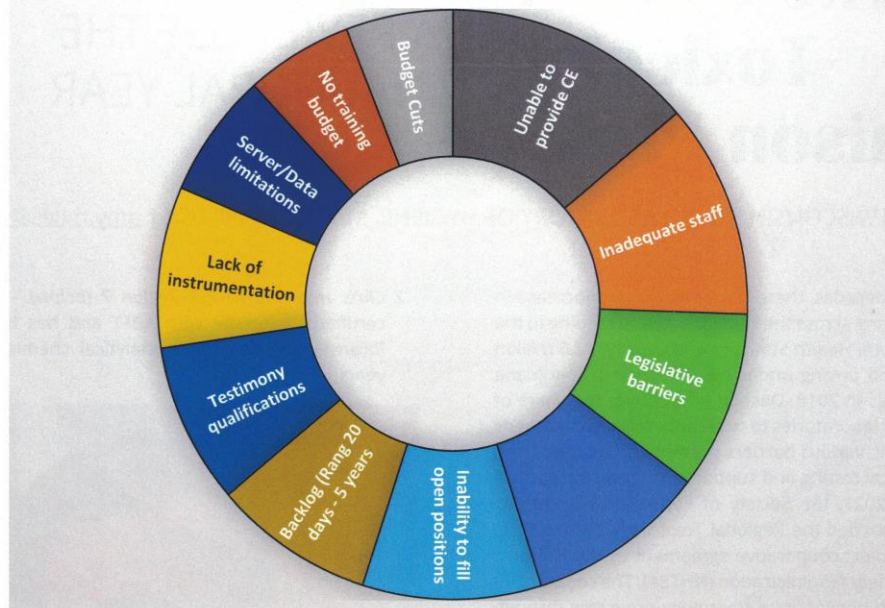
2. Chris Heartsill, NHTSA Region 7 (below) – Chris is also a certified Diplomate with ABFT and has been working in forensic toxicology and analytical chemistry for over 30 years.



3. Kristen Burke, NHTSA Region 9 (below) - Kristen has worked in the Toxicology field for over 24 years. Most recently, she worked as the Laboratory Director for the California Department of Justice, Bureau of Forensic Services – Toxicology Laboratory.



Forensic Toxicology Laboratory Needs (R5, R7, R9)



During the first year of the project, the RTLs identified each of the forensic toxicology laboratories in the regions, established connections with individuals within the labs, and began to understand their needs. The RTLs received detailed feedback from the laboratories in their regions. Topics from the feedback included supply chain shortages, the overall needs of the laboratories, and training requests. The chart above shows the specific needs identified by each laboratory. The size of each box represents the percentage of need for the respective topic. All topics are similar in rank, which indicates that the resolution for laboratory issues will not be a "one size fits all" approach.

One of the most common requests for all laboratories in the RTL regions is the need to develop and validate new drug testing methods. Several laboratories have the instrumentation required to perform the work; however, they lack the capability and resources to dedicate the time to method development. This critical area must be addressed to better align laboratories' drug testing within and between states. Over the last year, the RTLs have assisted laboratories with method development and validation plans and provided feedback; however, the lack of the necessary workforce to complete and implement the methods continues to be a barrier. The RTLs continue to focus on this issue, looking for ways to provide funding and resources.

The next most common need identified by the laboratories is training. The following topics have been the most common among laboratories' requests:

- Testimony training
- Meeting testing recommendations and standards
- Method development and validation
- Prosecuting the drugged driver (toxicology centric)
- Oral fluid testing
- Toxicology drug results and interpretation

In December of 2022, the RTLs traveled to Indiana to provide a full day of in-person testimony training for the Indianapolis laboratory. The feedback from the laboratory was extremely

positive. Using the attendees' critiques, the RTLs will be providing free, tailored, one-day training to the laboratories in each of their regions throughout 2023.

During the progress of the RTL project, states across the United States were affected by various supply chain shortages. Of most significant concern were the 10 mL gray top blood collection tubes used in every state to collect specimens for DUID investigations. The RTLs collaborated with SOFT to provide guidance and solutions to the tube shortage. Not only were the RTLs successful in providing support, but the initiative also led to connecting laboratories that did not typically collaborate. Those laboratories that were lacking in certain supplies could barter or trade for other laboratory items that were in short supply.

Since the project's announcement, there have been several requests from highway safety partners to include the RTLs in working groups, task forces, assessments, and other meetings. The RTLs are working to attend every meeting where possible and, if needed, the Project Manager, Amy Miles, attends and provides the meeting information back to the RTLs. In addition to meeting and committee attendance, the RTLs reach out to the laboratories in the respective state to ensure they are also aware of the meeting and encourage their involvement. So far, attending these meetings alongside the laboratories has proven to be very successful in connecting the state laboratory with various groups that otherwise did not know of each other.

As the RTL project continues to grow, laboratories from regions outside of the project scope have asked for assistance. The RTLs and Program Manager are working to include laboratories outside of the represented regions. However, there is a need for RTLs in all of the NHTSA regions. In response, NHTSA is analyzing the best approach to grow the project and make it a nationwide initiative.

If you have any questions about the RTL project or would like more information, please get in touch with the Program Manager, Amy Miles at amy.miles@sh.wisc.edu.