

Southwest Louisiana Crime Lab

An ISO 17025 Accredited Laboratory

*Success
Story*

Accreditation Blues

Southwest Louisiana (SWLA) Crime Lab is a regional crime lab located in Lake Charles, Louisiana that serves five parishes, or counties, in its surrounding area. With over 30 years of experience, the lab specializes in controlled substances, blood alcohol, DNA, and fingerprinting.

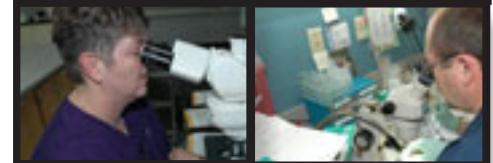
SWLA Crime Lab is accredited by the American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors Laboratory Accreditation Board (ASCLD/LAB) International. According to the ASCLD/LAB website, accreditation is earned when a lab demonstrates that “its management, operation, personnel, procedures, and instruments; physical plant and security; and personnel safety procedures meet certain standards.” One element of ASCLD/LAB International accreditation is compliance to ISO 17025 standards. ISO accreditation requires a tremendous amount of documentation and organization; it can be a very stressful process.

“In addition to the time and effort it took to maintain our ISO accreditation, we were trying to manage many of our electronic documents on a server that we shared with the local sheriff’s department. Our documents were hard to find, track, and organize,” notes Lynell Benoit, QA Manager of SWLA Crime Lab. “Document revisions were very difficult and tedious to maintain; we wanted a tool to make the whole process simpler.”

A Clear Solution

The continual increase of document volume drove SWLA Crime Lab to shop around for a document control solution. The solution to the lab’s document control needs came directly from an industry forum. “We rely on other professionals in our field,” commented Ms. Benoit. “Qualtrax was suggested on an industry message board, and in the end that is the solution our team chose.”

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One unforeseen benefit the software solution offered the lab was its powerful workflow engine. “I knew Qualtrax had ‘workflows,’ but I had no idea they would be so helpful. Many of our processes are now electronic—so far we track vacation requests, training, chemicals, travel, and performance metrics related to cases and samples. We have plans to put more of our processes into the Qualtrax database. It just makes sense to move in that direction,” said Ms. Benoit.

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The ISO 17025 Challenge

Document control is an essential element of running a successful laboratory. In the forensic field, a majority of the documents that come through a lab have to be retained for life. For example, if a case that is twenty years old were to resurface, the lab responsible for that case must have documentation showing policies and procedures used at that time on file. This presents an obvious problem for any lab that relies on a paper-based system. Before moving to an electronic solution, SWLA Crime Lab stored hundreds of thousands of printed documents in a traditional filing system.

Since implementing Qualtrax, SWLA Crime Lab has moved a huge majority of its printed documents to the Qualtrax system. “Anything that we’re not required to have on file as a hard copy is stored in an electronic format in Qualtrax,” stated Ms. Benoit. “We’ve practically emptied out our building. Our lab has space!”

Additional Perks

In addition to increased floor space since moving to electronic storage, the lab has noticed time savings when looking for specific documents. In her interview, Ms. Benoit mentioned that documents are much easier to find, even when she does not know where to begin looking. The searching capabilities in Qualtrax have made document searches much simpler for lab personnel.

Employees have also found great benefit in the document revision feature within Qualtrax. Lab personnel no longer rummage through folders and files to track down previous versions of documents—everything they need is organized in one, secure location.

Company-wide Buy-in

The SWLA Crime Lab is a small operation that is run by less than twenty employees; every single employee uses Qualtrax to some extent. In order to maintain accreditation, certain documents must be reviewed by specific employees on an annual (and sometimes quarterly) basis. Qualtrax manages all of this information and helps them stay current on all document review deadlines. In addition, all employee vacation requests and many training procedures are processed and stored in Qualtrax.



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A Simpler World

Ms. Benoit has been a pioneer for her laboratory in the cross-over from a paper-based system to electronic document and process control. When asked what advice she would give to others looking to make a similar transition, she responded, “I would recommend Qualtrax to anyone. It’s a great product, and the entire Qualtrax staff, including sales representatives, the implementation team, and support is wonderful and very willing to work with you—they gladly explain anything and everything in great detail. Qualtrax has made my world much simpler.”