

Forensic Advantage System: What Judges Need to Know

The Forensic Advantage System (FA) is the laboratory information management system implemented by the North Carolina State Crime Laboratory. FA went online in the Crime Laboratory on January 1, 2008. FA is an almost completely paperless system. The only paper files generated with this system are toxicology reports. These paper reports must be physically notarized, but are scanned into the system for retention.

In the Laboratory, Analysts record all of their notes and original observations on digital worksheets. These worksheets were designed by each Section and were created to follow the procedures used in the Laboratory. The system also contains what is called an object repository for each examination. This repository stores any digital files generated by the Analyst during their examination. Examples of the types of files generated include photographs, spectral charts and graphs, Excel spreadsheets with drug weights, Analyst CVs, evidence receipts, and raw data from DNA examinations. The data recorded on the worksheet by the Analyst generates the Laboratory report for the examination. It is important to note that there are no paper file folders for cases that were completed after January 1, 2008. The information for these cases is stored in digital file folders.

The Laboratory began using FA to deliver laboratory reports to DA's offices in the Fall of 2008. Since March of 2010, discovery packets are delivered to the DA's offices at the completion of an examination. When an Analyst completes their work in an examination it is sent for peer review. At the completion of the peer review process the report is released by the Analyst. Once a report is released, the discovery packet for the examination is delivered to the DA's office within approximately 30 minutes. The discovery packet is delivered as one Zip file containing all the files from the examination. The Zip file contains a main PDF file which contains the case information, case record (examination) information, submission paperwork, laboratory report, Analyst worksheets, phone logs, chain of custody for the examination, and a list of attachments. The attachments to the main PDF file are the object repository files listed above. The discovery packets for toxicology cases are delivered online but the notarized copy of the report is delivered via first class mail.

Once discovery packets are published to the DA's offices, they are available for 60 days. After 60 days, the packets are removed from the website. The laboratory can make these packets available for another 60 days upon request. Any time additional information is added to an examination record, such as an e-mail communication or phone log entry, the case is re-published to ensure that the DA's office has all information in the case.

The laboratory is continuing to improve and refine the website and discovery delivery process. The laboratory has delivered specifications to the vendor to update the FA website. The estimated delivery date for these changes is the first quarter of 2012.

