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CIFS-FSL-LP

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INFORMATION PAPER

SUBJECT: Use of the term "Identification" in Latent Print Technical Reports

1. Forensic science laboratories routinely use the terms "identification" or "individualization" in technical reports and expert witness testimony to express the association of an item of evidence to a specific known source. Over the last several years, there has been growing debate among the scientific and legal communities regarding the use of such terms within the pattern evidence disciplines to express source associations which rely on expert interpretation. Central to the debate is that these terms imply absolute certainty of the conclusion to the fact-finder which has not been demonstrated by available scientific data. As a result, several well respected and authoritative scientific committees and organizations have recommended forensic science laboratories not report or testify, directly or by implication, to a source attribution to the exclusion of all others in the world or to assert 100% certainty and state conclusions in absolute terms when dealing with population issues.
2. The Defense Forensic Science Center (DFSC) recognizes the importance of ensuring forensic science results are reported to the fact-finder in a manner which appropriately conveys the strength of the evidence, yet also acknowledges that absolute certainty should not be claimed based on currently available scientific data. As a result, the DFSC has modified the language which is used to express "identification" results on latent print technical reports. The revised language is as follows:

"The latent print on Exhibit ## and the record finger/palm prints bearing the name XXXX have corresponding ridge detail. The likelihood of observing this amount of correspondence when two impressions are made by different sources is considered extremely low."

3. This revision to the reporting language is not the result of changes in the examination methods and does not impact the strength of the source associations. Instead, it simply reflects a more scientifically appropriate framework for expressing source associations made when evaluating latent print evidence. The next step will be to quantify both the amount of corresponding ridge detail and the related likelihood calculations. In the interim, customers should continue to maintain strong confidence in latent print examination results.

4. References:
 - a. National Research Council (2009). Strengthening Forensic Science in the United States: A Path Forward. National Research Council, Committee on Identifying the Needs of the Forensic Science Community. National Academies Press, Washington, D.C.
 - b. National Institute of Standards and Technology (2012). Latent Print Examination and Human Factors: Improving the Practice through a Systems Approach. Expert Working Group on Human Factors in Latent Print Analysis, U.S. Department of Commerce, National Institute of Standards and Technology.
 - c. Garrett, R. (2009). Letter to All Members of the International Association for Identification, Feb. 19, 2009.
5. Questions regarding this information paper may be directed to Mr. Henry Swofford, Chief, Latent Print Branch, USACIL, DFSC, 404-469-5611 and Henry.J.Swofford.Civ@mail.mil.