

Just the DEA National Forensic Laboratory Information System

Introduction [00:00:05] Now, this is recording, RTI International Center for Forensic Science presents Just Science.

Voiceover [00:00:20] Welcome to Just Science, a podcast for justice professionals and anyone interested in learning more about forensic science, innovative technology, current research, and actionable strategies to improve the criminal justice system. In episode eight, Just Science interviews DeMia Pressley from the DEA's Diversion Control Division to discuss the importance of information sharing across law enforcement and public health agencies through forensic partnerships. The National Forensic Laboratory Information System, otherwise known as NFLIS, is a Drug Enforcement Administration program that collects results of forensic analysis and other related information from local, regional, and national entities. What sets NFLIS apart from other similar programs is that participation is 100 percent voluntary. As such, DeMia Pressley and other members of NFLIS work hard to collect information and share what they have learned with the forensic community. Listen along as our guest discusses the purpose of the NFLIS program, the importance of partnerships within the forensic community, and how NFLIS data is used to inform drug policy and drug enforcement initiatives in this episode of Just Science. This season is in collaboration with the Bureau of Justice Assistance Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Abuse Program funding. This season is funded by the National Institute of Justice's Forensic Technology Center of Excellence. Here's your host, Paige Presler-Jur.

Paige Presler-Jur [00:01:39] Hello and welcome to Just Science. I'm your host, Paige Presler-Jur with the Forensic Technology Center of Excellence, a program of the National Institute of Justice. Our topic today is a discussion of the importance of information sharing across law enforcement and public health agencies through forensic partnerships. We will highlight national level data sources to monitor the changing dynamics of substance abuse, drug-related overdoses and law enforcement interdiction. We hope this discussion will provide ideas and guidance for communities such as those with the Bureau of Justice Assistance Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Abuse Program funding that are working to strengthen the collection and sharing of data across systems to understand and address the impact of illicit substance use and misuse. Here to help us with the discussion is DeMia Pressley with the Drug Enforcement Administration's, or DEA's, Diversion Control Division. She is the program officer for the National Forensic Laboratory Information System, or NFLIS, and has been influential in expanding the program from its focus on drug exhibits to collecting data on ante- and post-mortem toxicology. Welcome, DeMia.

DeMia Pressley [00:02:55] Thank you so much. I'm happy to be here.

Paige Presler-Jur [00:02:57] DeMia, what jumps out to me from your bio is how you highlight your efforts to work with local, federal, and international partners. Can you tell us about why that is so important to your work?

DeMia Pressley [00:03:08] NFLIS is an one hundred percent voluntary program. We would not have any data if it were not for the participating entities sharing their information with us. Thus, we are committed to finding ways to share it with the broader community.

Paige Presler-Jur [00:03:23] What led you to your role as the program officer within the DEA's Diversion Control Division?

DeMia Pressley [00:03:29] Prior to joining Diversion Control, I was a chemist with the DEA laboratory system. I loved being on the bench. And so working with NFLIS is one way that I can stay connected to the phenomenal work of forensic laboratories.

Paige Presler-Jur [00:03:44] The National Forensic Laboratory Information Management System, or NFLIS program, is an important resource in monitoring illicit drug abuse and trafficking. I'd like to begin by asking you to tell us about the history and purpose of the NFLIS program.

DeMia Pressley [00:04:01] The original NFLIS program is now what we call NFLIS-Drug. DEA needed a data source for what controlled substances were being seized by law enforcement. Federal cases have to reach a certain size threshold and we just did not have as much data as we thought we needed to be able to control the new and emerging substances. Thus, NFLIS started as a data collection from state and local forensic drug laboratories to be able to provide that information.

Paige Presler-Jur [00:04:31] Can you explain to our listeners how NFLIS data are used nationally and in local communities around the country?

DeMia Pressley [00:04:39] NFLIS data is used to support drug scheduling actions and to inform drug policy and drug enforcement initiatives. It's very important, especially on a federal level, because it allows us to look across the country at an unbiased data set to see what's going on, what's actually being reported by the forensic laboratories, and to use that as a standardized set of data to be able to present to public health as well as law enforcement.

Paige Presler-Jur [00:05:07] I'd love to hear some examples of how NFLIS-Drug has supported a community's ability to identify the drugs on their streets.

DeMia Pressley [00:05:14] Well, first, NFLIS participants, all the laboratories that share the data with us have direct access to the NFLIS data system. In addition, we share the data with local policymakers or public health agencies. So it becomes particularly important if a local system is trying to get extra funding from the state or they're having additional issues with emerging drugs that they want to support with their law enforcement data. So we always try to provide that information for them.

Paige Presler-Jur [00:05:46] And how about at the state level - what does this data mean to state level drug task forces?

DeMia Pressley [00:05:52] As far as the state level, generally, it's at the policy level. So we help the states, if they request it, to be able to look across their state, especially if they have multiple jurisdictions and many different labs, whether at a local level or county or regional level. So we are able to package that data together for them so that they could influence their policy making decisions. At the same time, there may be special initiatives. We've also been contacted by governor offices or state public health offices that are looking to determine what other information is out there about emerging drugs so that they can make decisions about funding levels for the coming years.

Paige Presler-Jur [00:06:34] Can you tell us how you identified the need for additional components to the NFLIS-Drug program?

DeMia Pressley [00:06:39] NFLIS-Drug has been a phenomenal resource for our efforts, but we were seeking ways to complement the data and be able to support our scheduling actions with even more data to drive home the point of how dangerous some of these emerging substances can be. So we were contacted by actually a local coroner that had heard about NFLIS-Drug and was being contacted by law enforcement due to the number of drug-related deaths in his area. And he contacted my office about the NFLIS program, wondering if he sent his data to us, could we compile it in such a way that they would no longer have to deal with the onslaught of media and law enforcement inquiries that they were receiving? So that was one of the initial ideas we had about expanding to a medical examiner and coroner program. What goes hand in hand with that data would be the toxicology data, which would be a natural fit with the drug data. So those two systems - NFLIS-TOX and NFLIS-MEC - were born. And we've been working to expand the system to include both of those ever since.

Paige Presler-Jur [00:07:48] How do you feel the addition of NFLIS-TOX will benefit the U.S. forensic community and the United States' response to substance abuse as a whole?

DeMia Pressley [00:07:57] More and more, we're seeing forensic scientists break out of their silos and work with other disciplines. We all have the same goal of providing reliable analytics to our stakeholders as well as the greater public. So working together makes all of our jobs easier. So hopefully combining NFLIS-TOX with the existing NFLIS-Drug program as well as add in NFLIS medical examiner/ coroner, so NFLIS-MEC, just helps make a more complete picture for anyone who is looking at this type of data.

Paige Presler-Jur [00:08:31] You can really hear how important partnerships are for NFLIS from what you've told us thus far. Are there additional partnerships that would be helpful for communities to utilize NFLIS data even further?

DeMia Pressley [00:08:43] Yes. One, recently, NFLIS joined and partnered with DEA's Synthetic Opioid Surveillance Group to form the NFLIS Synth-Opioids drug forum. Synth-Opioids has been a stand-alone program for the past few years and has operated somewhat like a listserv where forensic scientists, or anyone who's interested actually, can provide information that they're looking for emerging drugs. And so partnering with Synth-Opioids, NFLIS was able to provide a permanent platform for this listserv group that the users can now come in and search old threads and discussions of emerging drugs and to be able to share information in one centralized place. It was already a great program, and so now, the two programs working together, we're hoping to do even more things for the community.

Paige Presler-Jur [00:09:37] Will you describe for our listeners what types of challenges laboratories might face to contribute to the NFLIS program?

DeMia Pressley [00:09:45] Laboratories faced a host of challenges, and the NFLIS program tries to always be aware of those, whether they're a small laboratory or a large laboratory. We have systems that are paper-based and don't have any computerized casework. We have larger laboratories that have very complicated LIMS or laboratory information management systems, but they just don't have the time and energy to report to one more system. So overall, I would say no matter the size of your laboratory or your caseload, it's always resources and how to best use them is the biggest challenge.

Paige Presler-Jur [00:10:22] And will you highlight for our listeners how NFLIS has worked to mediate these challenges for laboratories?

DeMia Pressley [00:10:28] What I am most proud about in the NFLIS program is that we work to meet laboratories where they are. We aren't trying to change what the laboratories do or how they do it. If you are paper-based laboratory, we can work with that. We discuss the type of reports that those laboratories already produce so that we're not adding to the burden of the work that they already have. We're also asking laboratories to share a very important commodity, which is their data. So we do not dictate at all any rigid parameters that must be done. Rigidity doesn't help us. It doesn't help them. So our main focus is to work with laboratories in the way they're already doing business and to see how NFLIS fits into their model and not how they can fit into ours.

Paige Presler-Jur [00:11:17] Wow. NFLIS truly works to mediate any burden for laboratories to be part of the program. Can you highlight for us ways that NFLIS is helping to facilitate conversations around what is happening real time with the data?

DeMia Pressley [00:11:30] Real time data has always been a challenge for us. The desire to see more timely data keeps growing without any major change or insertion of capital to make it happen. Making an active group like Synth-Opioids available to a larger audience is one way that NFLIS is facing this challenge. The NFLIS Synth-Opioids program will also have publications for those who aren't able to follow the group regularly. Another item that NFLIS now produces is the NFLIS Snapshot. We heard feedback from many of our participants that they wanted to be able to see more timely NFLIS data. So now we have this quarterly snapshot that's produced each quarter to report what's been reported to the system during that time period so that we can turn it around quickly.

Paige Presler-Jur [00:12:20] The NFLIS Synth-Opioids program and NFLIS Snapshot sound so beneficial to the forensic community, especially to help identify new and emerging drug threats. So DeMia, tell us what's next for the future of NFLIS?

DeMia Pressley [00:12:35] Right now, we're focused on two things, which one is our website. It's undergoing a complete overhaul that will be able to allow us to provide more information and be interactive for anyone who comes to visit. And the second part is we are launching our 2021 survey of the NFLIS-TOX community. So that's going to be a big undertaking for us this year.

Paige Presler-Jur [00:12:59] How can toxicology laboratories be a part of these important initiatives?

DeMia Pressley [00:13:04] We would like to encourage all toxicology laboratories to participate in the NFLIS programs. If you would like more information about NFLIS-TOX and participating, you can definitely reach me at nflis, which is N-F-L-I-S, @usdoj.gov. In addition, we can provide information about the NFLIS-TOX survey that will be going on this year. No matter the size of the laboratory, large or small, if you are a toxicology laboratory in the United States, public or private, you should receive from us a survey. And we appreciate those who a few years ago participated in the survey and we hope even more will participate this year. One thing we have learned as we've been building the NFLIS-TOX program is that there aren't many entities that actually survey the toxicology community. They may survey forensic laboratories as a whole, but they do not focus in on tox. And so we've taken the data that we collected in our last survey and we tried to turn it around and produce meaningful reports that we thought would be of interest to the community. So if anyone would like to add more to what we're doing with the community or

see data presented in a different way, again, I encourage them to reach out to me and to the NFLIS program at nflis@usdoj.gov.

Paige Presler-Jur [00:14:29] And for NFLIS-MEC, what would you want the medical death investigation community to be on the lookout for to be included in the NFLIS-MEC program?

DeMia Pressley [00:14:39] The MDI community can look forward later this year to receiving more information from NFLIS-MEC asking them to join. This has been a very taxed community and NFLIS is very aware of that, and we're doing everything in our power to make sure that we're not adding even more to their burden or to be another problem that they have to solve. So we've been very cautious about how much information we send out with recruitment to be respectful for everyone's time, especially during this pandemic when the MDI community is already so busy. Our efforts with MEC recruitment have been put on hold in respect for everything that community is dealing with right now.

Paige Presler-Jur [00:15:22] How has the DEA Synth-Opioids partnership with NFLIS been going? Can you give us any highlights that our listeners would find intriguing?

DeMia Pressley [00:15:30] Yes, the partnership is progressing quite well and we're all happy about the direction it's headed. The Synth-Opioids program already had over two hundred users from seven different countries. And what NFLIS found intriguing is that you had these scientists, whether they were toxicologists, those working in MEC offices or other MDI offices, or even some from the jurisprudence side of the forensic community. But they're all sharing information rapidly and unknowns are being identified quickly to point people in the correct direction or sharing techniques for analysis. So NFLIS found this important because the quicker that a laboratory can identify an unknown or to see a trend that's happening, the quicker they are to report it and that will be reported to our system. And so for NFLIS-Drug or even NFLIS-TOX, those new substances are less likely to be reported as unknowns, but we will actually have a name to those substances. So we're happy with this new platform and to be part of a system where people can rapidly share information or be able to go and search for information and bring it back to their colleagues.

Paige Presler-Jur [00:16:49] I'm so excited to hear about the ways that NFLIS is growing. It will be impactful for the forensic and toxicology fields, as well as for communities responding to the substance use disorder crisis in our nation. Is there anything specific for 2021 that you'd like to highlight for our listeners?

DeMia Pressley [00:17:07] I'd just like to highlight, again, the toxicology survey that will be coming out this year. We will be reaching out to the over 400 toxicology laboratories in the U.S., and we hope as many that can, can participate so that NFLIS is allowed to share your story and show the type of work and highlight the work that's being done by the tox laboratories, small and large, public and private, across the country. And we look forward to seeing more users on our newly unveiled website later this year. We think users will find the interactive components quite helpful in the work they're doing, and we hope to be able to interact with the community much more.

Paige Presler-Jur [00:17:51] We're running near the end of our time together. Are there any final thoughts you'd like to share with our listeners?

DeMia Pressley [00:17:58] I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the hundreds of laboratories that share their data with us. They make this all possible. In addition, I'd also like to thank the non-NFLIS participants that share information through our component surveys, whether it's the NFLIS-Drug survey, the NFLIS-TOX survey that we will be sending out later this year. We appreciate the time that they dedicate to helping us to form an accurate picture of the forensic disciplines.

Paige Presler-Jur [00:18:27] I'd like to thank our guest today for sitting down with Just Science to discuss the importance of information sharing across law enforcement and public health agencies through forensic partnerships. It was wonderful to hear how the National Forensic Laboratory Information System has done so much and plans to continue to enhance our understanding of drug mortality, drug frequency trends, and laboratory methods and practices. Thank you, DeMia.

DeMia Pressley [00:18:55] Thank you so much.

Paige Presler-Jur [00:18:56] If you enjoyed today's conversation, be sure to like and follow Just Science on your podcast platform of choice. For more information on today's topic and resources in the forensic field, visit forensiccoe.org. I'm Paige Presler-Jur and this has been another episode of Just Science.

Voiceover [00:19:16] Next week, Just Science sits down with Clarence Jordan, the Vice President of Wellness and Recovery at Beacon Health Options, to discuss the impact of stigma on outcomes for individuals with substance use disorder and other strategies that communities can use to mitigate that stigma. Opinions or points of views expressed in this podcast represent a consensus of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of its funding.