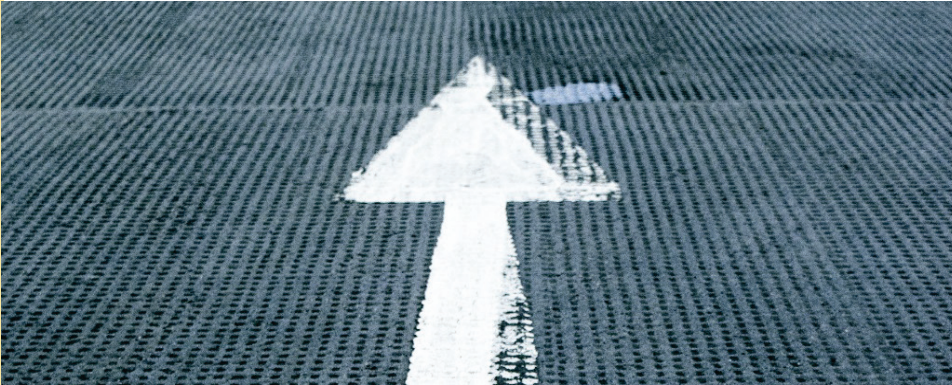




IN-BRIEF

The American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors Accreditation Initiative: Successes, Challenges, and Future Directions



“The whole original purpose was not to take the place of the accrediting bodies but to be the bridging strategy, to help those agencies who need it.”

—John Byrd, ASCLD Executive Director

Context

Forensic accreditation is achieved through a third-party assessment of a laboratory’s quality, administrative, and technical systems and is a way for the laboratory to demonstrate technical competence. It is a structured system to evaluate a laboratory’s compliance with established standards and ability to perform specific types of testing, measurement, or calibration activities that produce accurate and reproducible data. Accreditation is available to public and private laboratories, law enforcement agencies, and other forensic science service providers (FSSPs) (e.g., medical examiner and coroner officers).

In 2019, the American Society of Crime Lab Directors (ASCLD) launched the ASCLD Accreditation Initiative (AAI) in collaboration with the National Institute of Justice’s (NIJ’s) Forensic Technology Center of Excellence (FTCoE) at RTI International. The AAI was designed to leverage expertise and knowledge from laboratory directors, quality assurance managers, and technical subject matter experts who serve as mentors to support FSSPs committed to achieving international accreditation within an 18-month timeline. To date, eight FSSPs have been accredited.

This report summarizes prominent themes that emerged from interviews conducted by the FTCoE with key AAI stakeholders. Overall, stakeholders had highly positive experiences in the program and believe it has tremendous value for facilitating accreditation. They also offered several helpful suggestions for how the AAI could be refined to better serve the forensic community.

Objectives

- ▶ Describe the benefits of forensic accreditation for FSSPs.
- ▶ Describe the implementation and impact of the AAI.
- ▶ Highlight lessons learned, challenges, and positive experiences in the program.
- ▶ Provide guidance for the future implementation of the AAI program.



Problem and Solution Synopses

Achieving accreditation is an increasingly urgent priority for FSSPs.

In the last several years, a growing number of FSSPs have been accredited, and several states have passed legislation that mandates FSSP accreditation. The most recent data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics' 2014 Census of Publicly Funded Crime Laboratories indicate that 360 of 409 (88%) publicly funded forensic crime laboratories have been accredited by a professional forensic science organization.¹ The American National Standards Institute National Accreditation Board (ANAB) and the American Association for Laboratory Accreditation (A2LA) are the largest forensic accreditation bodies used by FSSPs in the United States.

Accreditation is a complex process that requires rigorous technical assessments.

International accreditation programs are predicated on the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and require FSSPs to comply with ISO/International

Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) standards. Ultimately, ISO accreditation indicates that the FSSP has successfully completed a rigorous assessment by an accrediting body and demonstrated compliance with more than 400 specific requirements. For example, to achieve and sustain accreditation, FSSPs must develop a quality manual that thoroughly describes their quality management system. They must also assess the technical competence of their analysts through proficiency testing (e.g., declared tests, random case analysis, blind tests), a quality control tool used to determine whether personnel are abiding by office protocols and field-wide best practices. Analyst certification, which is often required as part of an agency's quality assurance program, occurs via external certification programs that assess individual competencies to perform analyses.¹

Accreditation is valuable for FSSPs because it:



- Fosters a third-party, independent review of the FSSP's quality management system to ensure technical competence and production of accurate and reliable data.
- Creates an opportunity for an FSSP to evaluate and improve their policies, operations, and overall performance.
- Assures customers that the highest possible international standards are used and signifies the FSSP's commitment to quality and continuous improvement.
- Fosters professional partnerships in the field and builds a network of support.
- Functions as an essential practice in risk management.

FSSPs face barriers to accreditation because it:



- Requires a significant investment in time, financial resources, and human capital, which is especially challenging for small FSSPs.
- Can pull resources away from casework, which may increase turnaround times and case backlogs.
- Is not required for many jurisdictions, so some FSSPs may not be adequately motivated to achieve it.



Accreditation instills confidence that forensic services meet quality standards, but it is difficult to achieve.

Forensic accreditation enables FSSPs to evaluate their own performance and provides an opportunity to strengthen internal policies and operations. Additionally, it increases public trust in the laboratory's operations. Obtaining accreditation provides customers with confidence of the FSSP's commitment to quality and continuous improvement.^{1,2}

Despite the many benefits of accreditation, it is a demanding process that requires significant investment of an FSSP's resources. Some FSSPs may be concerned that initiating the accreditation process could divert resources away from casework and consequently increase turnaround times and perpetuate case backlogs. Additionally, except for select jurisdictions, forensic accreditation is largely voluntary and not required by law. Small FSSPs may not have adequate resources or infrastructure in place to initiate and obtain accreditation.

ASCLD AAI Program

ASCLD launched the initiative to help guide FSSPs through the challenging accreditation process.

Recognizing the need for universal accreditation of FSSPs and the barriers that many FSSPs face in pursuing it, ASCLD launched the AAI in partnership with FTCoE, a cooperative agreement between NIJ and RTI. The AAI was formed to provide direct support, mentorship, and resources to FSSPs committed to achieving accreditation by leveraging expertise and experiences of laboratory directors, quality assurance managers, and technical subject matter experts trained and certified as accreditation assessors.

ASCLD has long been a proponent of universal accreditation and had previous initiatives to educate the forensic community on its advantages. However, according to former ASCLD President Matthew Gamette, the field lacked a program dedicated to helping FSSPs achieve accreditation. He believed that talking to crime laboratories or law enforcement agencies about the value of accreditation was not enough when they needed

support navigating the arduous accreditation process. After consulting with his peers, the AAI was formed—a focused effort to pair agencies committed to achieving accreditation with experts in the field who have worked as accreditation assessors and could mentor agencies through the accreditation process. The ASCLD Board of Directors was initially excited about the idea but also hesitant that the initiative could be viewed as an extension of the former nonprofit organization ASCLD Laboratory Accreditation Board (ASCLD/LAB) that previously offered an ISO accreditation program for FSSPs. Unlike ASCLD/LAB, the AAI would be a free service and a way for ASCLD to provide resources to the forensic community while simultaneously supporting its mission to achieve universal FSSP accreditation. The board recognized the difference between the former ASCLD/LAB and the AAI and voted to move the program forward.

ASCLD created a task force to develop and execute a roadmap to accreditation.

The ASCLD Domestic Accreditation Task Force (ADATF) was created to initiate the program, determine how to vet interested agencies, and define the scope of participation in the AAI. The various steps the ADATF envisioned for the AAI are listed in *Exhibit 1*.

Vision of the AAI Program

- A focused effort to pair FSSPs committed to achieving accreditation with experts in the field who have worked as accreditation assessors who have worked as accreditation assessors and could act as mentors.
- A no-cost service that lowers the barriers to timely and successful accreditation, leading to more-widespread implementation of FSSP quality systems.

1. The first step in initiating the AAI was **raising awareness about the program**. The ADATF marketed the AAI as an opportunity for FSSPs to implement quality systems that can ensure repeatable practices and provide scientifically



valid and reliable work products while reducing waste and unnecessary costs, promote public trust, foster professional partnerships, and boost employee morale by underscoring the agency's commitment to improving customer service. Simultaneously, ASCLD initiated a nationwide call for applications from FSSPs interested in receiving support for their pursuit of accreditation.

2. ASCLD received applications from FSSPs. Initially, the program received fewer applications than expected, likely because of the impact of COVID-19 on FSSP resources. However, this allowed the ADATF to vet applicants and mentors thoroughly before enrolling them in the program. It also allowed ASCLD to focus on fewer FSSPs, protecting against overwhelming the mentors or overstressing the program in its first year. Additionally, it made it easier for ASCLD to make program adjustments when faced with unanticipated issues. Thus, fewer FSSPs in the startup phase of the AAI program was a benefit.

3. ASCLD selected candidates after speaking with applicants to outline the program's objectives and expectations and to measure the FSSP's commitment to an 18-month timeline. In 2019, the AAI officially launched with four participating pilot laboratories; three FSSPs were added to the roster later that year. Another nine FSSPs were enrolled into the program in 2020. Of these 16 FSSPs, eight were laboratories from city police departments, seven were laboratories from county-level law enforcement agencies, one was a state police laboratory, and one was a privately funded laboratory.

"In the past, there were lots of initiatives to have agencies achieve accreditation, but speaking about agencies getting accredited was not enough- it didn't help the agencies actually achieve it."

—Matthew Gamette, 2018 ASCLD President

4. FSSPs were then paired with their mentor. In total, seven mentors were recruited to work with AAI FSSPs. To work with the program, mentors were (a) previously

Ongoing Support:

- FSSPs hold regular calls with their mentors to discuss progress, issues they were having (e.g., challenges interpreting ISO standards, writing quality and procedure manuals) and potential solutions for moving forward.
- FSSPs also participate in regular calls with ASCLD representatives, other participating FSSPs, and AAI mentors to report on their progress, provide feedback on the program, and benefit from advice from other AAI FSSPs that were further along in the accreditation process.

trained and approved accreditation assessors through an accreditation body (e.g., AL2A, ANAB), (b) ASCLD members, and (c) approved by the ASCLD Board of Directors. Additionally, they participated in a mentor onboarding training. Mentors also agreed to volunteer as a forensic community service without direct compensation.

5. The mentor met with the FSSP to provide an overview of the program and key milestones of the accreditation process. Additionally, ASCLD set up meetings between the FSSP and the accrediting bodies (e.g., A2LA and ANAB) so that the FSSP could choose an accrediting body.

6. In some circumstances, following the FSSP's selection of either A2LA or ANAB accreditation, FSSPs received standards training that detailed the conditions and requirements of accreditation.

7. Then, the mentor conducted a site visit to the FSSP facility (in person when possible) to access the FSSP's current quality management system, policies, procedures and overall level of accreditation readiness.

8 & 9. The site visit was followed by frequent virtual meetings to help prepare the FSSP for **an internal audit** that assessed where the FSSP was in the accreditation process.

10. After correcting deficiencies identified during the internal audit, the mentor conducted a mock assessment



(i.e., a “preassessment”) of the FSSP that simulated an actual accreditation board assessment, allowing the FSSP to resolve any needed corrective actions and the mentor to review the agency’s accreditation application and readiness state.

11. Following the mock assessment, **the FSSP submitted the accreditation application.**

12 & 13. The mentor assisted the FSSP as they addressed **corrective actions** identified by the accrediting body **until accreditation was achieved.**

14. Ultimately, FSSPs who obtained accreditation under the AAI were encouraged to **give back to the forensic community** by supporting incoming FSSPs pursuing accreditation.

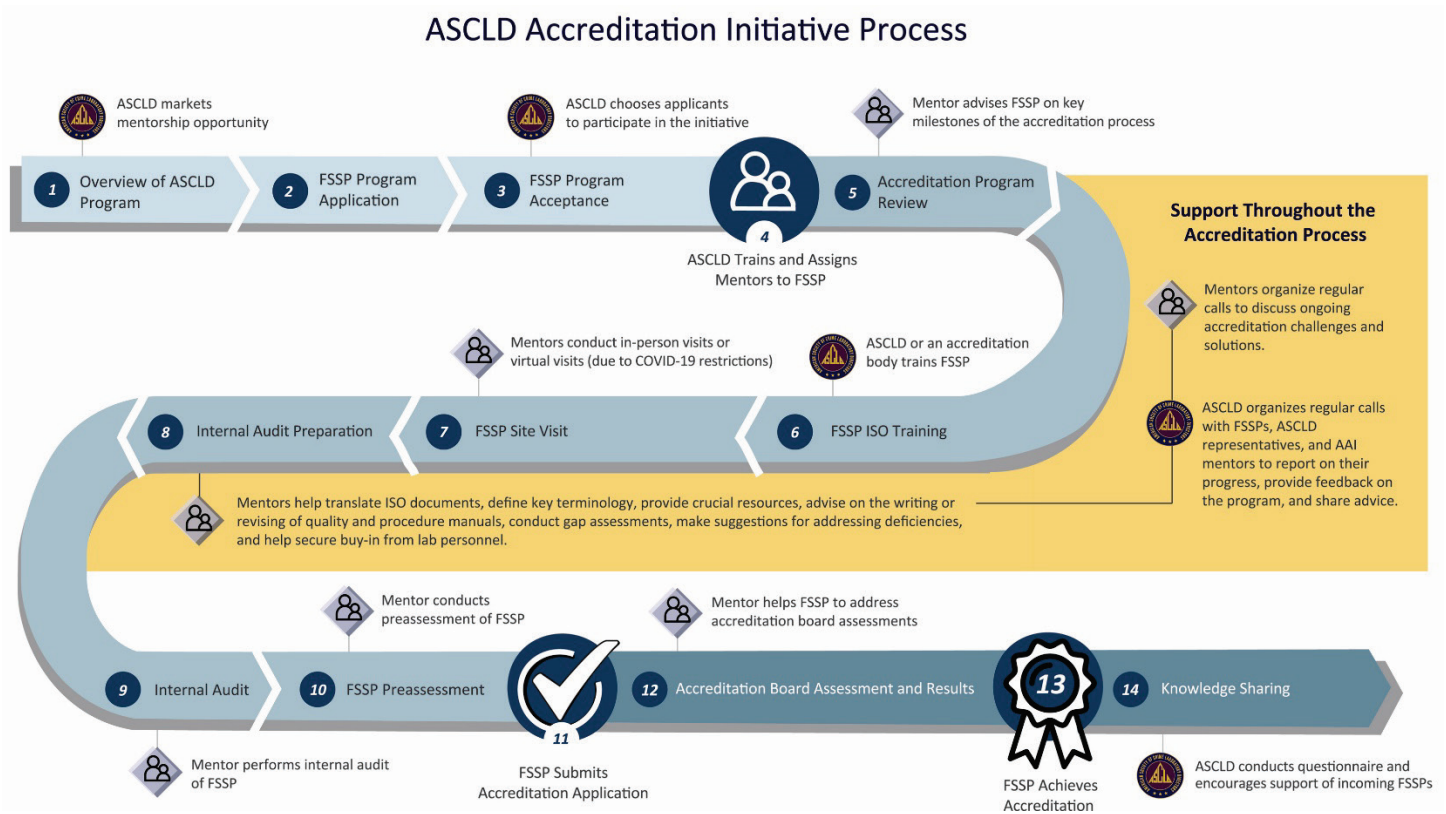


Exhibit 1. ASCLD and the AAI mentors supported FSSPs through a series of steps to help them achieve accreditation.



Impact of the AAI Pilot

As of June 2022, the AAI successfully facilitated accreditation for eight participating FSSPs (see *Exhibit 2*). Collectively, these FSSPs obtained accreditation in numerous forensic disciplines, including latent prints, crime scene investigation, friction ridge, handwriting and questioned documents, digital evidence and digital forensic analysis, serial number restoration, drug analysis, body fluid identification, and firearms and toolmarks. Seven FSSPs remain in the program and are at various stages in the process of working toward their accreditation goals.

Agency	ISO/IEC	Accredited Disciplines
Nampa Police Department Crime Laboratory	17025	Latent Prints, Crime Scene Investigation
Salt Lake City Police Department	17020	Friction Ridge, Latent Prints, Crime Scene Investigation, Firearms/Toolmarks
Guardian Exchange, LLC	17020	Digital and Video Imaging Technology and Analysis
Sarasota County Sheriff's Office Drug Laboratory	17025	Controlled Substances
New Jersey State Police*	17025	Firearms/Toolmarks, Firearm Operability, Serial Number Restoration
Washington County Sheriff's Office*	17020	Friction Ridge, Crime Scene Investigation
City of Atlanta Police Department Crime Laboratory	17025	Firearms/Toolmarks, Friction Ridge
Boise Police Department Crime Laboratory	17025	Body Fluid Identification, Crime Scene Investigation, Latent Prints

Exhibit 2. Agencies accredited under the AAI as of June 2022. *Pilot agencies that worked with ASCLD leadership prior to the implementation of mentors.

Beyond achieving accreditation, the AAI mentorship process offered the following benefits to participants:

Guidance for accreditation on a realistic timeline. AAI participants indicated that the program successfully executed a streamlined process to help FSSPs become accredited within a practical timeline. ASCLD set realistic expectations about program participation during initial conversations prior to program kickoff. Thus, participants were provided a clear understanding of how to apply to the AAI, the nature and timing of milestones they would need to reach, the amount of work required to reach each milestone, and the costs associated with obtaining accreditation.

Education opportunities on the value of and mechanics behind accreditation, which influenced leadership buy-in. Participating FSSP personnel noted that they could not have achieved accreditation, or not achieved it as efficiently, without the help of their mentor. Many of the AAI FSSPs began their journey at “ground zero,” with little knowledge and few processes needed for accreditation. FSSP personnel reported that the mentor’s support and camaraderie during regular check-ins was invaluable as they worked through this demanding process. At times, mentors advocated for the FSSPs or helped explain the process to senior management, who sometimes had little understanding of the process.

Support to establish a sustainable quality management infrastructure. The program helped establish solid, sustainable systems that ensured quality long after AAI participation concluded. With AAI mentor support, the FSSPs were ready for accreditation when the ISO accreditation application was submitted, and only minor corrective actions were needed to reach final approval. One FSSP respondent described the AAI as the “best thing” they have ever done, because they now have clear directions and standard operating procedures to guide their operations. In the end, creating a robust quality management system provided consistency,



organization, and predictability, which are key to any operational process.

A supportive community of practice for accreditation: Regular program meetings and trainings provided opportunities for FSSPs to connect and share accreditation resources and created a network of support to leverage and continue in the future. Moreover, because it was such a successful experience, FSSPs and mentors want to share their experiences and new knowledge to help other agencies pursue accreditation moving forward.

“Once we were assigned our mentor, we quickly progressed through the milestones, and she was a priceless resource. We maintained communication with her from the early stages through completion. She prepared us exponentially and always had a solution to any obstacle (i.e., template or explanation). She performed a complete audit for us, which really made us feel prepared for our first assessment.”

—Nancy Lugwigen, Sarasota County Sheriff’s Office

Significant engagement even in the wake of the pandemic. Regular check-in meetings between mentors and FSSPs fostered a rapport and an informal system of trust and accountability that leveraged the mentor’s expertise and kept FSSPs on track for hitting key milestones. By most accounts, in-person site visits were extremely helpful for acquainting the mentor with the FSSP’s unique culture and operations, information that was used to customize plans to assist the laboratory. In many cases, the COVID-19 pandemic precluded in-person visits, as had been envisioned by the architects of the AAI. Instead, site visits were done virtually with screen shares, video calls, and many emails. Although some FSSPs were able to interact virtually, other sites were unprepared. Without a site visit, mentors faced several challenges, including difficulties understanding the physical layout of their facility, visualizing the flow of operations, and

building personal relationships that could ease communication and facilitate collaboration.

Development opportunities for AAI mentors. Generally, the AAI mentors believed the program, and the opportunity to shepherd FSSPs to accreditation, has been a valuable experience for their own development. They entered the program knowing it would be a lot of work, and it was—especially when FSSPs wanted to move quickly. Although their participation has been voluntary and not compensated monetarily, they recognized an opportunity to give back to the forensic community and gained new perspective of the accreditation process. Serving as an AAI mentor will also distinguish them from their colleagues as they pursue future leadership positions.

Lessons Learned from the AAI Pilot

The AAI mentorship pilot program successfully supported FSSP accreditation in alignment with ASCLD’s vision, and several lessons were learned through the program.

The accreditation process must weave in the laboratory’s coexisting requirements and policies. The most prominent theme that emerged from the FTCOE’s interviews with AAI participants was that pursuing accreditation was a highly demanding process involving a significant amount of time, resources, and hard work for both FSSP personnel and mentors. Anja Einseln, President of Seaglass Training and a trainer for AAI laboratories, likened the process to building a cake, layer by layer. The foundation of the cake is the set of requirements associated with the standard—in this case either 17020 or 17025. Then, the second cake layer is either A2LA- or ANAB-specific requirements and possibly technical guidance from various resources such as Organization of Scientific Area Committees documents, scientific working group publications, or other international standards. The icing is the requirements of the parent organization, including security requirements, background clearances, or health and safety standards. Finally, the decorative sprinkles are FSSP’s own technical procedures. In the end,



although these cakes look similar on the outside, they are all unique once they are cut open.

FSSP circumstances define a realistic timeline for accreditation; there is not “one size fits all.” Before committing to the AAI, mentors were educated on the goals and purpose of the program, the various pathways to accreditation, and the estimated time they would be expected to devote to assisting FSSPs each month. ASCLD gave prospective mentors advice that would eventually ring true—every FSSP operates within a unique context based on the quality of their current operations, work culture, level of resources (e.g., personneling, technology, funding), relationships with other local agencies, and knowledge of and support for obtaining accreditation. For some FSSPs, especially those with a dedicated quality manager or manual writer, accreditation may be possible within 6 months to a year. But in many, especially smaller FSSPs in which key personnel are juggling multiple responsibilities, the process will take longer. Thus, the key to supporting FSSPs is understanding the environment in which the FSSP is working to create a relevant and flexible accreditation plan. For example, some of the laboratory’s forensic disciplines will drop off the priority list while others might be added—but it is all a part of the journey, and mentors are there to help get them to the finish line.

FSSPs without guidance may have trouble “self-assessing” their readiness for accreditation. Some FSSPs were faced with the realization that they were not as prepared for accreditation as they once thought. The layers of their “cake” were either missing or lacking and needed to be “made from scratch.” As one respondent put it, “It’s tough when you think you have a good laboratory, and someone comes in for accreditation and every year after that tells you otherwise.” But the FSSPs ultimately agreed that they were willing to work with the AAI program and invest in themselves to get through the accreditation process.

Undergoing accreditation can be a hard sell if FSSP personnel do not understand its value. The challenges to accreditation proved to be more than simply a steep learning curve. Some personnel who did not fully recognize the value of accreditation felt overwhelmed by the number of requirements and tight timetable. Others grew to resent the process or feared it was a mechanism to terminate individuals or push them to resign. Training laboratory personnel properly to appreciate accreditation and understand that it is not meant to be punitive was a critical ingredient for success. Personnel involvement was essential—from brainstorming ways to meet specific requirements to writing sections of manuals for which they were the subject matter experts. Involving the larger team in the process ultimately helped build a culture of inclusivity and collective investment in achieving accreditation. Instead of swimming upstream, the FSSP worked toward shared goals with a sense of camaraderie and mutual responsibility.

Taking an ISO training course is an advantage. Completing an ISO training course allowed the FSSP personnel to interpret the ISO manuals, understand the nuances of accreditation, educate their personnel on accreditation fundamentals, and effectively map out the actions needed to obtain accreditation. Some FSSPs learned the hard way that delaying ISO training led to increased personnel frustration, especially as they attempted to write procedure manuals.

Documenting procedures is a critical but challenging task for laboratories. One of the biggest hurdles was composing quality and procedure manuals with limited writing experience for these types of documents. In fact, some AAI FSSPs spent the first year and a half just writing their manuals. Knowing that casework will often take priority over quality management, mentors had to be relentless in their follow-ups throughout the process, checking in often to ensure that FSSPs were writing procedures that reflected their operations. At times, getting personnel to document their procedures was like pulling teeth, so much so that the scope of which disciplines to pursue had to be truncated. Some



personnel quit rather than taking part in the journey, presumably because they were unwilling to change—or at least because they did not understand why changing was necessary.

“Have the personnel participate—whichever applies to their specific department. Don’t just write a manual and dictate it for their department.”

—Jennifer Edgar, Guarded Exchange

Participating FSSPs could have benefited from more than one mentor. Even with all they brought to the table, one mentor was not always enough. One FSSP needed more guidance on 17020 standards than their mentor could provide. Other mentors did not have technical expertise in the disciplines the FSSP was pursuing for accreditation and struggled with interpretations of ISO requirements and common terminology and practices specific to the discipline. In these instances, FSSPs sometimes reached out to other agencies in their state for help, or content experts and other resources were brought in for consultation. Mentors also worked hard to apply their substantive and quality assurance backgrounds in creative ways to assist their FSSPs, even when they had limited knowledge about the FSSP’s disciplines and everyday operations. For example, one mentor acknowledged their limited understanding of digital forensic analysis and thus their ability to provide discipline-specific examples to the laboratory as they wrote their manuals. However, leveraging their deep experience and broad knowledge base, the mentor was able to develop parallel examples using areas that most people in the field can understand, regardless of their specialty areas.

AAI mentorship is a time-intensive role and may not be sustainable as a volunteer effort. The mentors acknowledged that there is a risk of burnout, especially when mentors try to work with more than one FSSP at a time. Although participation in the program is rewarding, the reality is that the volunteer system may not be sustainable in the long run—at least not without significant mentor turnover year to year. Ideally, moving forward, more mentors will be strategically recruited to ensure a participant pool with collective expertise on 17020 and 17025 accreditations and a wide range of disciplines. They will each be limited to working with one FSSP at a time (two at the most) and possibly compensated monetarily for their efforts.

Guidance for Future Laboratory Accreditation Efforts

This AAI mentorship pilot—along with learnings from this FTCoE program review—has driven the development of practical guidance for ASCLD leadership and future AAI mentors and FSSPs considering pursuing accreditation.

“A huge lesson learned and something that needs to be explored as we go forward is, ‘how do we get to top leadership within the organizations?’ Help them understand risk management, liability, and how accreditation can help them.”

—Matthew Gamette, 2018 ASCLD President

Guidance for ASCLD and AAI Mentors

- Support from senior leadership within an FSSP is critical for success. Support entails senior leadership understanding what accreditation is and why it is necessary and having a realistic understanding of the scope of work, costs, and timeline required to achieve it. A lack of support can stall or altogether prevent progress. Accordingly, ASCLD **should continue to thoroughly vet FSSPs and identify those best positioned for success based on the extent to which agency leadership understands and supports the accreditation process.**



- Accreditation is an essential practice for risk management, a point that resonates well with agency leadership. **ASCLD should continue to highlight risk management to the leadership of prospective agencies and develop its communication strategy to reach as many unaccredited FSSPs as possible as it works toward its goal of universal accreditation.**
- The AAI experienced significant impact with the COVID-19 pandemic. Although a few FSSPs were able to host on-site visits with their mentors prior to the onset of the pandemic, many had to rely on virtual communications. Moreover, the future of the pandemic and possibly other public health emergencies that may limit in-person interactions is uncertain. Thus, FSSPs pursuing accreditation need a robust system in place to facilitate virtual communications (e.g., videoconferencing, screen-sharing) with their mentors while staying on schedule to hit key accreditation milestones. Moving forward, **ASCLD should vet FSSPs during the application stage to ensure that they are capable of hosting assessments of their facility in virtual settings and that limitations on in-person travel would not significantly derail progress toward accreditation. Additionally, they may also consider extending the 18-month timeline.**
- Respondents were in universal agreement that ASCLD did a tremendous job with upfront communication of the expectations of participation in the AAI and the significant work it would take to achieve accreditation. At the same time, both FSSP personnel and mentors emphasized that the process was even more work than they expected, with numerous, unforeseen challenges. Therefore, to best prepare FSSPs and to ensure that they are selecting those agencies best positioned for success, **ASCLD should continue to be transparent with potential applicants about the scope of work that will be involved and use insights gained in the first few years to help applicants anticipate and mitigate issues that may arise throughout the process.**
- Some respondents believed the program was better positioned to support FSSPs seeking 17025 accreditations rather than 17020. Based on these experiences, **ASCLD should update the AAI toolkit to include more 17020-specific resources and guidance and recruit mentors with experience in 17020 accreditation.**
- Although participating mentors were invaluable to the accreditation process, additional mentors who are technically knowledgeable in specific substantive areas or disciplines will help the AAI program. If possible, **ASCLD should recruit a broader pool of experts to participate in the program who collectively have experience in a wide range of disciplines to best support FSSP needs.** This effort may include bringing on more experts to act as consultants to mentor–FSSP partnerships, compensating mentors monetarily, adding discipline-specific subject matter experts to assist the primary mentor when needed, or dropping the requirement that mentors be ASCLD members to expand the pool of candidates. If not possible, ASCLD should recruit mentors with basic knowledge of a wide range of disciplines, enabling them to assist FSSPs even when knowledge of a specific discipline is limited. With a larger pool of mentors, ASCLD can assign mentors to only one FSSP at a time, which should protect against mentor burnout.
- Writing quality and procedure manuals was a significant challenge for FSSPs participating in the AAI. Many FSSPs lack the expertise to write these types of documents and do not have a personnel member who can devote substantial amounts of time to writing manuals. Although manual writing training was part of the AAI program, it remained a time-consuming task and led to timeline delays. To speed up the process, **ASCLD may consider bringing quality managers into mentor–FSSP teams to help FSSPs write their manuals or host workshops specifically dedicated to manual writing.**



Guidance for FSSPs

- Accreditation involves many moving parts, and as such, it takes a village to obtain it. Before committing to pursuing accreditation, **FSSPs should ensure that they have personnel to champion the accreditation process and focus on meeting specific milestones.**
- Rather than dictating changes to operations from the top down, FSSPs should build an accreditation team and engage individual personnel members to contribute to the process, leveraging their unique experiences and areas of expertise to assist with manual writing and general problem-solving. Incorporating personnel into the process will help build a culture of inclusiveness and collective investment that will streamline the entire process.
- Before initiating the process, **FSSPs should ensure that they have a champion who has experience in accreditation to lead the team.** This will help to give structure to the process, anticipate and mitigate challenges, and lead to a more organized and efficient experience for everyone involved.
- Lack of buy-in and resistance to the idea and purpose of accreditation was a key challenge experienced by FSSPs. **Thus, FSSPs interested in pursuing accreditation must invest in training and educate their personnel on the purpose and nuances of accreditation early in the process so that they understand why the FSSP is pursuing accreditation.** Participating in ISO training early in the process (rather than putting it off until later) will also help ensure that the accreditation team can devise an effective plan and a realistic schedule to meet key milestones and anticipate various complications.

- FSSPs pursuing accreditation, especially those new to the process, should create an accreditation plan that is manageable in scope. Attempting to accredit too many areas, especially areas that differ significantly, can be overwhelming and counterproductive for the entire effort. **Instead, FSSPs should learn the process by focusing on a small number of disciplines to start (i.e., one to three).** After achieving accreditation in those areas, FSSPs can return to the process with gained knowledge and experience to pursue additional areas. However, this phased approach may be more costly for FSSPs depending on their timelines for adding other disciplines.

“Take the training first and do the work (try to function) as if you were accredited before you apply. Figure out what the standards are asking and see what you have in place already.”

—Jenifer Edgar, Guarded Exchange

Conclusion

The AAI has proven to be a success. To date, eight FSSPs have achieved accreditation with AAI assistance, all within a few years of program inception. Undoubtedly, herculean efforts by the FSSPs, champions at ASCLD, and a team of hard-working mentors are responsible for the success of the program. Together, they have built an infrastructure that can support accreditation efforts for years to come.



Appendix: Methodology for FTCoE Program Review

In this study, the FTCoE leveraged the experience of ASCLD leadership, AAI mentors, and FSSPs supported by the mentors to identify key learnings and guidance for future development of the program. The FTCoE:

- Developed a semistructured interview guide, which was designed to steer the discussion between the respondent and the interviewer while allowing for a conversational flow.
- Conducted interviews with 11 AAI stakeholders to gain a holistic understanding of the program and the experiences and lessons learned by participating FSSPs, mentors, and ASCLD leadership. These were 45-minute to 1-hour virtual interviews with voluntary stakeholders during a 3-month period. Two sessions were conducted with members from the ASCLD leadership team, three sessions with representatives from three FSSPs that achieved accreditation under the AAI, and three sessions with three AAI mentors who have collectively worked with nine FSSPs in the program over the last few years. Based on the semistructured interview guide, respondents were asked to (1) recall the details of their involvement with the AAI from the beginning to the present day; (2) describe how they made key decisions involved with accreditation; (3) identify the components of the program that facilitated successful participation; (4) highlight challenges experienced along the way; and (5) offer any guidance for future growth of the program.
- Analyzed responses provided in a short ASCLD-administered questionnaire that was completed by three FSSPs after they had completed the program.
- Conducted interviews with the training and consulting company (Seaglass Training), which provided foundational ISO standards training to AAI FSSPs.
- Reviewed interview notes and log initial reflections of each session, coded the notes, organized codes into thematic clusters (e.g., challenges or facilitators of AAI participation), and then synthesized information from the thematic clusters to yield substantive findings to inform this report following the completion of interviews.



Resources

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