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Virginia's Western Forensic Laboratory and Medical Examiner Facility Break Ground for Expansion

(Roanoke, Va.) Representatives from the Virginia Department of Forensic Science (DFS) and the Virginia Department of Health, as well as Secretary of Administration Nancy Rodrigues and Secretary of Public Safety and Homeland Security Brian J. Moran, broke ground today for a cutting-edge forensic laboratory and medical examiner facility. This expansion to the state facility in Roanoke County more than doubles the size of the existing building.

DFS staff in the Western Laboratory provides forensic services in the disciplines of controlled substances, toxicology, trace evidence, forensic biology, latent prints and impressions, firearms and toolmarks, and questioned documents. The existing laboratory opened in 1995; by 2005, it had reached its maximum capacity for DFS. The needs of the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME), which performs autopsies for cases in the western region, also increased during this time. In 2009, the Commonwealth purchased the land beside the Western Laboratory and plans for expansion began.

“Between 1995 and 2013, our caseload increased 41 percent,” said Department of Forensic Science Director Linda C. Jackson. “There have been increases in the number of cases submitted and the number of scientists in the laboratory, as well as changes in the types of cases submitted and the types of instrumentation used to perform the analyses. This new space will help our staff to more effectively manage these larger workloads, and will provide space for much needed forensic equipment.”

The expansion also benefits the OCME by doubling the number of autopsy tables and expanding their administrative space. “The western region is the largest in the state,” said Chief Medical Examiner William T. Gormley, MD. “As with DFS, the number of cases seen by the OCME has increased and our need for space and equipment has followed suit.”

The \$34 million project is expected to be completed in about two years. It will include a three-floor, 62,000 square-foot addition to the existing 54,000 square-foot building. Approximately 27,000 square feet of the existing building also will be renovated. The team hopes to have the facility Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design (LEED) certified, making it a green building recognized for best-in-class building strategies and practices.

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