A2LA Forensic Accreditation Program
Frequently Asked Questions

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General

Q. Who is A2LA?

A. The American Association for Laboratory Accreditation (A2LA) is the largest, multi-discipline accreditation body in the U.S., having accredited over 3500 labs to various ISO standards over its 35-year history. A2LA is a non-profit, membership organization based in Frederick, Maryland and its accreditations to ISO standards are recognized and accepted not only domestically within the U.S., but also world-wide.

Q. Why did A2LA launch a forensic program?

A. A2LA is in business to serve its customers and to fulfill its vision of “being the premier provider of accreditation accepted everywhere and by everyone.” When our customers asked us to develop a program, it was not a question of whether we should, but how we could do it effectively and competently and become the leader in the industry.

A2LA offers accreditation programs for:

- Testing and Calibration (ISO/IEC 17025)
- Inspection (ISO/IEC 17020)
- Proficiency Testing Provider (ISO/IEC 17043)
- Product Certification Body (ISO/IEC 17065)
- Clinical Testing (ISO 15189)
- Reference Material Producer (ISO Guide 34)

As well as subprograms* for:

- Biological – food, veterinary, medical marijuana
- Chemical – veterinary, animal drug testing, anti-doping, food and pharmaceutical testing, consumer product safety, medical marijuana
- Clinical – CLIA
- Electrical – FCC equipment authorization, CTIA, CPSC, Bluetooth, EPA Energy Star, Smartgrid, NAVAIR, Automotive EMC
- Environmental – lead, air quality, underground storage tank, DoD, TNI field sampling, air emissions
- Forensic – Maryland licensure, FBI QAS, forensic identification
- Geotechnical – putting green
- Information technology – gaming standards, internal protocol
- Mechanical – GE Aviation, CPSC, EPA Energy Star
- Sustainable Energy
- Thermal
- Inspection – special inspection, FedRAMP, medical marijuana
- Product Certification – telecommunication certification body, EPA Water Sense, EPA Energy Star
- Proficiency Testing Provider – TNI

*Please see A2LA.org for a full description of each program and subprogram (http://www.A2LA.org/appsweb/industry.cfm)

A2LA is uniquely qualified to offer customers a comprehensive accreditation through use of trained and highly skilled technical assessors and A2LA staff.

**Q. What is the difference between A2LA and other accreditors that offer forensic accreditation?**

A. A2LA was one of the original signatories to the International Laboratory Accreditation Cooperation (ILAC) Mutual Recognition Arrangement (MRA) and since that time has been very actively involved on ILAC committees, working groups and task groups to assist in the growth and promotion of the ILAC MRA and accreditation. In addition, A2LA maintains accreditation programs in multiple standards and disciplines and has options for dual accreditation and joint assessments. A2LA is also the only accreditation body in the United States that is internationally-recognized for ISO 15189 (clinical) accreditation and which has been recognized by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) for clinical laboratory accreditation under CLIA. A2LA is also the only accreditation body in the United States that is recognized by the United States Government for their RedRAMP program for IT Cloud Computing accreditation (ISO/IEC 17020).

A2LA contracts with technical experts working in forensic fields to assist in the performance of assessments; ensuring that the most experienced and technically competent individuals are selected to act as A2LA assessors.

A2LA is a professional society run for and by its members. Membership in A2LA is open to all interested parties, not just accredited customers (e.g. specifiers, regulators, end users) and comes with many benefits, including the right to vote on officers and directors of the Association and discounts on A2LA training programs. An organization does not have to be a member to become accredited, and accreditation by itself does not confer A2LA membership.

The Forensic Examination Advisory Committee (FEAC) is open to all interested parties and meetings are held in person and through webinar and teleconference to allow options for participation by full Committee membership. The FEAC is tasked with the development of
accreditation and assessment guidelines in accordance with the ISO/IEC 17025 and ISO/IEC 17020 requirements and with reviewing and reaching consensus on how relevant technical methods, procedures, protocols, techniques and/or guidelines are to be interpreted and assessed.

A2LA continues to grow its programs through research, community participation and interaction with technical experts to provide customers with comprehensive accreditation offerings. Through A2LA’s numerous programs and subprograms, A2LA is able to offer accreditation in even the most unique areas of forensic testing and inspection, such as forensic odontology and anthropology.

A2LA serves the forensic community by hosting training classes online and in-person, through attendance and presentation at meetings, and through participation on committees and commissions.

A2LA staff maintain memberships with numerous forensic associations; including the AAFS, IAI, CBD-IAI, AFQAM and ASTM forensic committees, Maryland Forensic Laboratory Advisory Committee (FLAC), forensic working group of the International Laboratory Accreditation Cooperation (ILAC), forensic working group of the Inter-American Accreditation Cooperation (IAAC), Organization for Scientific Area Committees (OSAC) Quality Infrastructure Committee and the National Commission of Forensic Sciences (NCFS) Subcommittee on Accreditation and Proficiency Testing.

A2LA contracted assessors maintain memberships with ASTM forensic committees and forensic scientific working groups (SWGs), technical working groups (TWGs), and Organization for Scientific Area Committees (OSAC) Scientific Area Committees (SACs) as well as continuing to work in their respective fields.

Q. Since launching the program, what formal recognitions has A2LA received?

A. As of September 2014, the A2LA forensic accreditation program has been evaluated and recognized by the states of Maryland and Texas. In addition, the National DNA Index System (NDIS) Procedures Board has reviewed and formally approved the designation of A2LA as an accrediting agency under the United States Federal DNA Identification Act (42 U.S.C. 14132).

Through legislative mandate, the A2LA forensic accreditation program is also recognized in Alabama, California, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, and Minnesota.
Q. I don’t know a lot about the Federal DNA Identification Act, can you tell me more about your approval?

A. The Federal DNA Identification Act allows for the collection and indexing of DNA Profiles and sets requirements for the maintenance of the system including the laboratories that may perform testing and the accreditation bodies that may accredit them. A2LA underwent rigorous review by the NDIS Procedures board including a review of all program materials, peer evaluation of A2LA performing an FBI QAS assessment, and evaluation of A2LA DNA assessors, and was found to meet the requirements as set forth in the Federal DNA Identification Act, thus approving A2LA to assess and accredit laboratories that would like to take part in the system.

Q. How involved is A2LA in the forensic community?

A. A2LA serves the forensic community by hosting training classes online and in-person, through attendance and presentations at meetings, and through participation on committees and commissions.

A2LA staff maintain memberships with numerous forensic associations including the AAFS, IAI, CBD-IAI, AFQAM and ASTM forensic committees, Maryland Forensic Laboratory Advisory Committee (FLAC), forensic working group of the International Laboratory Accreditation Cooperation (ILAC), forensic working group of the Inter-American Accreditation Cooperation (IAAC), Organization for Scientific Area Committees (OSAC) Quality Infrastructure Committee, and the National Commission of Forensic Sciences (NCFS) Subcommittee on Accreditation and Proficiency Testing.

A2LA contracted assessors maintain memberships with ASTM forensic committees and forensic scientific working groups (SWGs) and technical working groups (TWGs) as well as continuing to work in their respective fields.

Q. My unit performs a number of activities, but I’m only ready to get my latent prints section accredited. Can I do this?

A. As an applicant to the A2LA forensic accreditation program, you are asked to identify the activities which you would like to include within your scope of accreditation. A2LA does not place limitations or requirements on what activities at your facility must be accredited and we work with you to ensure that all requested areas that are deemed compliant are captured on your scope.
In addition, A2LA has a well-documented system for processing requests for scope expansion and reduction and will work with you to ensure a swift and stress-free process. A2LA does not charge fees for scope expansions; however, if a significant amount of data must be reviewed or if an on-site assessment is needed, you would be charged for the technical assessor’s time. In all cases, A2LA will communicate with you to ensure that you understand any potential costs prior to moving forward.

**Q. My unit collects and uploads fingerprints to the AFIS system; are we eligible for accreditation?**

**A.** A2LA recognized that all phases of the forensic process are critical and that these may not include testing or examinations. Such activities are identified in A2LA document *R309 - Specific Requirements - Forensic Examination Accreditation Program-Inspection* and include:

- The evaluation and documentation of a scene;
- The collection of evidence;
- The transport and storage of evidence;
- The inspection of evidence for compliance with known samples (e.g. bullet/cartridge case comparison, fingerprint comparison);
- The submission of evidence to accredited testing laboratories for analysis; and
- The determination of events based on inspection and testing results (e.g. scene reconstruction).

For those activities performed in support of forensic work, these may be accredited under the ISO/IEC 17025 or ISO/IEC 17020 standard, as applicable.

**Q. I'm ready to apply, but need to request funding from my command, can I get an estimate?**

**A.** A2LA is happy to provide a free estimate to interested forensic laboratories and units upon request. In addition, fixed price and not-to-exceed options are available.

**Q. It seems like the cost of accreditation goes up every year, what has A2LA done to help keep costs down.**

**A.** A2LA recognizes that over the years, budgets have not expanded to address the increased needs of the forensic community and that funds may be limited when it comes to
obtaining accreditation. As such, A2LA has instituted a fee-based cost structure which allows A2LA to confirm a set price for assessment and continued accreditation over a number of years. In these cases, only travel expenses would adjust with inflation and even there, A2LA is taking steps to help keep costs down. A2LA does not add administrative fees to travel expenses; rather we invoice for the actual cost and provide receipts when requested. Additionally, A2LA has arrangements with car rental agencies and enforces a per diem for all A2LA travel to ensure the best possible price for our customers.

Q. I am very active in the forensic community and know a number of other experts, what if I’m friends with the assessor that’s proposed for my assessment?

A. Before assigning any assessor, A2LA will submit an assessment proposal to the applicant with short bio-sketches of each assessor outlining their background and experience. If any of the assessors present a conflict-of-interest for the applicant, they can identify the conflict to A2LA and request that an alternate assessor be proposed.

Q. I need to have my assessment in the next two months, how quickly can you mobilize assessors?

A. If you have a need to be assessed within a set time frame, A2LA will make every effort to ensure that the assessment occurs within that time frame.

The benefit of using contracted assessors is that they keep days available on their personal schedules to perform assessments throughout the year and at times, at short notice. Just recently A2LA was able to mobilize a team of assessors to perform an assessment one week after receiving a complete application.

Q. Once I have my assessment, how quickly can I expect to be accredited?

A. Following your on-site assessment, the process can move quite quickly, but this is very dependent on how quickly you can address any non-conformities that were identified during the assessment. If non-conformities were not identified, accreditation can be completed in a matter of days.

If non-conformities are identified, the time needed will depend on how quickly your organization moves through the corrective action process and how quickly you are able to
provide evidence to A2LA of the resolution of any non-conformities cited. However, A2LA will ensure that you receive prompt responses to questions and that your corrective actions receive thorough and expeditious review, typically within one week. Once all non-conformances have been addressed and reviewed by an official review board, A2LA can complete your accreditation paperwork in a matter of days.

Q. Does A2LA have a proficiency test review board?

A. When a review of proficiency testing is needed, A2LA forms a review committee consisting of technical experts in the forensic discipline or sub-discipline in which the proficiency test was offered as well as experts in proficiency testing and statistical techniques, where needed. A2LA selects review committee members from the A2LA assessor corps and members of the A2LA Forensic Examination Advisory Board (FEAC). All members of the review committee sign a confidentiality agreement to ensure the confidentiality of A2LA customers. While A2LA encourages the use of accredited proficiency test providers, it is recognized that use of accredited providers is not required and that there exists a number of providers of varied quality available to the forensic community. Additionally, a number of factors may cause a proficiency test to produce outlying results and due to this, A2LA does not interpret outlying results to be a ‘fail.’ Rather, outlying results are viewed as an indication of a potential issue within an organization’s management system that required additional investigation and response.

To ensure a fair and reasonable review of all proficiency testing, A2LA first asks our accredited organizations to review proficiency testing results and to submit results to A2LA within 30 days.

If an outlier is identified, the organization is asked to provide A2LA with a response and to enroll in the next round of testing for that proficiency test. The accredited organization can provide a corrective action response, contest the applicability of the proficiency test, or contest the accuracy of the proficiency test. Responses received are stripped of any identification of the organization to ensure confidentiality and are then forwarded to a selection of A2LA contracted assessors and members of the A2LA Forensic Examination Advisory Board (FEAC) for review and comment. This committee of reviewers will evaluate the proficiency test in question and the organization’s response for appropriateness of the proficiency test and reasonableness of the organization’s corrective action and/or response.

In all cases, the accredited organization must enroll in the next available round of testing for that test and provide those results to A2LA within 30 days. If the organization receives outlying results in a subsequent round, that organization’s scope of accreditation may be limited until evidence of successful performance is provided.
Q. How does A2LA maintain the confidentiality of my documents and status within the accreditation process?

A. All A2LA staff, assessors, and technical experts involved in the assessment and accreditation process must sign a conflict of interest and confidentiality policy to ensure that the confidentiality of our customers is maintained.

All information in relation to a customer’s application is kept in strictest confidence and may only be released under written approval by the customer. In cases where review by a broader audience is required, documents are stripped of any identification of the organization or excerpts are taken to ensure confidentiality.

Q. I am already accredited by another accredits. Can I transfer this accreditation to A2LA?

A. A2LA does allow for the transfer of accreditation, provided that the requesting organization is accredited by an accreditation body that is a full member signatory to the International Laboratory Accreditation Cooperation (ILAC) Mutual Recognition Arrangement (MRA). In many cases, the transfer can be processed quickly and requires only a review of records and documentation. However, every situation is different and so we encourage you to contact us directly (info@A2LA.org or 301 644 3248) and we will be happy to walk you through the transfer process.

ISO/IEC 17025 Forensic Accreditation

Q. What is ISO/IEC 17025 and what is its basis?

A. ISO/IEC 17025:2005 General Requirements for the competence of testing and calibration laboratories is a standard that provides the specific requirements for quality and competence that are particular to testing and calibration laboratories. The standard promotes global harmonization of testing and calibration. ISO/IEC 17025 is used by laboratory customers, regulatory authorities and accreditation bodies to ensure competence.

Q. What is a “quality management system”?
A. A quality management system (QMS), as required by ISO/IEC 17025:2005, is a compilation of organizational documents that establishes the policies and procedures needed to direct and control an organization with regard to quality. It relates to general management activities, the provision and management of resources, the pre-procedure, test/calibration and post-procedure processes and evaluation and continual improvement. A QMS captures the requirements of an organization and structurally provides a roadmap that explains who, what, when, where and how sustainable and repeatable outcomes will be achieved.

Q. What makes up a quality management system?

A. A management system consists of policies, procedures, SOPs and records, all of which provide proof of goals, assign responsibility, describe how those responsibilities are to be performed and provide evidence of past accounts or occurrences of compliance.

Q. How widespread is ISO/IEC 17025? Is this accreditation program widely accepted?

A. ISO/IEC 17025 is an internationally-recognized standard, with over 80 International Laboratory Accreditation Cooperation (ILAC)-recognized accreditation bodies offering ISO/IEC 17025 accreditation programs. Although ISO/IEC 17025 is not mandatory in the U.S., an increasing number of forensic organizations have recognized the benefit of being accredited by an internationally-recognized accreditation body (such as A2LA).

Q. How is ISO/IEC 17025 accreditation different from ISO 9001:2008 certification?

A. ISO 9001 is a registration of a quality management system and serves as the basis for many of the other ISO standards because of its intentional generalness.

ISO/IEC 17025 incorporates the essential elements of ISO 9001 and adds technical competency underpinnings relevant to testing and calibration laboratories. Its primary application is to improve the management and technical structure of testing and calibration laboratories. ISO/IEC 17025 accreditation (as opposed to ISO 9001 registration) includes both an assessment of the Management System and an evaluation of the technical competency of the testing and/or calibration laboratories.
Q. I’m not familiar with ISO/IEC 17025; can A2LA help me to better understand the requirements of ISO/IEC 17025 and how to implement them in my laboratory?

A. A2LA is a 501(c)(3) non-profit educational institution. As such we offer a variety of public training courses with the purpose of helping organizations prepare for, achieve and maintain accreditation to ISO standards. One course currently offered by A2LA is “ISO/IEC 17025:2005 and Laboratory Accreditation for Forensic Organizations”, which assists attendees in understanding the ISO/IEC 17025 standard and implementing an effective quality management system.

In addition, A2LA offers both public and on-site training courses on specific principles contained within all of the ISO standards used by A2LA as the basis for our accreditation programs. Such principles include “root cause”, “corrective action”, “measurement uncertainty”, “internal audits” and “proficiency testing”.

More information may be found on our website (http://www.A2LA.org/training/index.cfm) or by contacting our Training Manager, Julie Collins, at jcollins@A2LA.org.

A2LA also provides explanations to many sections of ISO/IEC 17025 to assist our accredited organizations in understanding and applying the requirements consistently. These explanations can be found on the A2LA.org website under ‘documents’ and then clicking on the ‘Explanations for the ISO/IEC 17025 Requirements’ link or through the following link: http://www.a2la.org/faq/faqfinder170252005.cfm

Q. Not all sections of my lab are ready for accreditation; can I get one section accredited and add the rest later?

A. Yes. A2LA does not require that your full laboratory obtain accreditation. In addition, if you only require accreditation for a single test or small selection of tests, A2LA will assess and accredit you for only those tests.

Q. What if I get accredited and my chemistry section wants to add an additional test that they just finished validating?

A. You can add testing to your scope during your on-site assessment or between assessments by completing and submitting a request for scope expansion form (A2LA document F108 – Request for Expansion of Scope of Accreditation – Testing).
Q. Are there any hidden fees for expanding my scope, going inactive, or relocating?

A. A2LA does not charge fees for such activities. However, if review by a technical assessor or an on-site assessment is needed to confirm the continued compliance of your facility, you would be invoiced for the assessor’s time and travel expenses. In such cases, A2LA would notify you in advance of any potential cost to you before moving forward.

Q. I perform a unique type of testing and have validated my own internal procedures. Can I list these on my scope?

A. Internal procedures may be listed on A2LA Scopes of Accreditation provided they meet the requirements of ISO/IEC 17025 and the laboratory has shown through demonstration and a review of documentation and records, that they are able to perform work in accordance with that internal procedure.

ISO/IEC 17020

Q. What is ISO/IEC 17020 and what is its basis?

A. ISO/IEC 17020:2012 *Conformity assessment – Requirements for the operation of various types of bodies performing inspection* is a standard that provides the specific requirements for quality and competence that are particular to inspection bodies. In the context of forensic sciences, forensic inspection is defined as the examination of an item or location and, on the basis of professional judgment, the determination of conformity with proposed events or known conditions. Of particular importance is the concept of professional judgment based on education, experience, and training and how this judgment is used in determining which collection methods and processes to use at crime scenes, when developing latent prints, and when making critical decisions in relation to identifying evidence.

Q. What is a “management system”?
A. A management system, as required by ISO/IEC 17020:2012, is a compilation of organizational documents that establishes the policies and procedures needed to direct and control an organization with regard to quality. It relates to general management activities, the provision and management of resources, the pre-inspection, inspection and post-inspection processes and evaluation and continual improvement. A management system captures the requirements of an organization and structurally provides a roadmap that explains who, what, when, where and how sustainable and repeatable outcomes will be achieved.

Q. What makes up a management system?

A. A management system consists of policies, procedures, SOPs and records, all of which provide proof of goals, assign responsibility, describe how those responsibilities are to be performed and provide evidence of past accounts or occurrences of compliance.

While documentation of a management system is required, ISO/IEC 17020 does not require that such documentation be captured in a quality manual. This approach allows for organizations working under multiple standards (e.g. ISO 9001, ISO/IEC 17025, ISO/IEC 17020, ISO 15189) to more seamlessly integrate their management structures into one another.

Q. How widespread is ISO/IEC 17020? Is this accreditation program widely accepted?

A. In a June 2006 memorandum of understanding between the European Network of Forensic Institutes (ENFSI) and the European Cooperation for Accreditation (EA), the ISO/IEC 17020 standard was selected as the most appropriate for accreditation of crime scene inspection activities. While the ISO/IEC 17025 standard applies to all types of testing, it was noted that the process of inspecting, diagraming, and collecting items at a crime scene was not addressed. The evaluation of a crime scene requires a high level of professional judgment based on education, training, and experience and it was found that the ISO/IEC 17020 standard addressed these concerns. Since this time, accreditation of crime scene and related units to ISO/IEC 17020 has increased internationally and within the United States.

Disciplines identified as being the most appropriate for ISO/IEC 17020 accreditation include those where the examination process and final determination of results is made through the professional judgment of the forensic science practitioner. Such disciplines include crime scene analysis and reconstruction, latent print and fingerprint analysis, firearms and toolmarks, and digital forensics.
Q. How is ISO/IEC 17020 accreditation different from ISO 9001:2008 certification?

A. ISO 9001 is a registration of a quality management system and serves as the basis for many of the other ISO standards because of its intentional generalness.

ISO/IEC 17020 incorporates the essential elements of ISO 9001 and adds technical competency factors relevant to inspection bodies. Its primary application is to improve the management and technical structure of inspection bodies. ISO/IEC 17020 accreditation (as opposed to ISO 9001 registration) includes both an assessment of the Management System and an evaluation of the technical competency of the Inspection Body.

Q. What sorts of requirements are contained within ISO/IEC 17020?

A. Key requirements incorporated into the ISO/EIC 17020 standards are:

- Documentation of the management system
- Documented competency requirements and formal authorizations of staff
- Documented training and oversight program for all inspectors
- Continued evaluation of risks to impartiality and documented actions to eliminate risks

Q. I’m not familiar with ISO/IEC 17020; can A2LA help me to better understand the requirements of ISO/IEC 17020 and how to implement them in my laboratory?

A. A2LA is a 501(c)(3) non-profit educational institution. As such we offer a variety of public training courses with the purpose of helping organizations prepare for, achieve and maintain accreditation to ISO standards. One course currently offered by A2LA is “ISO/IEC 17020:2012 and Laboratory Accreditation for Forensic Organizations”, which assists attendees in understanding the ISO/IEC 17020 standard and implementing an effective management system.

In addition, A2LA offers both public and on-site training courses on specific principles contained within all of the ISO standards used by A2LA as the basis for our accreditation programs. Principles include “root cause”, “corrective action”, “measurement uncertainty”, “internal audits” and “proficiency testing”.
More information may be found on our website (http://www.A2LA.org/training/index.cfm) or by contacting our Training Manager, Julie Collins, at jcollins@A2LA.org.