

# PROPERTY AND EVIDENCE ROOM MANAGEMENT

*By: Gordon Ramsay, Chief of Police, Duluth, MN*

Property and evidence room management is a critical element in police operations. Unfortunately it is often an area, which can easily be neglected or overlooked as police personnel work to keep up with day-to-day operations. Lost or contaminated evidence can allow a homicide suspect to go free and can tarnish a department's reputation. Advances in forensic sciences, especially in the area of DNA analysis, have resulted in an increased amount of evidence collected and stored. This evidence is not only from violent crimes, but also includes property and drug crimes.

The Duluth Police Department is seeing significantly more evidence and property intake than we have in past years. Additionally, once the evidence enters the property room it is kept longer than ever before. Some of this is due to the fact that jurors in court cases want more evidence in order to find a guilty verdict; this has become known as the "CSI effect." Popular programs such as CSI Miami have caused juries to be influenced by what they see on these types of shows. Therefore it is imperative that police departments critically review property and evidence room operations to ensure current national standards and procedures are being met.

We are presently facing the challenge of running out space to store property and evidence. Our police department is crammed into space that was designed in the 1920's when property and evidence storage was only a small part of overall police operations. Our current space is well below national standards. Not only is every shelf and corner jam packed, but there is also a problem with moisture and water due to occasional leaks in our building's foundation.

If we fail to address property room overcrowding, the results will have a devastating impact on our department as well as the entire criminal justice system.

In an effort to reduce our overcrowding, we are taking steps to improve our management of property and evidence. The first step we took

began late last year when we stopped a long tradition of the Duluth Police Department's annual spring auction held in the basement of City Hall. This auction involved a large amount of staff time as well as hiring an auctioneer. The money brought in from the auction barely covered the cost of having it.

A few of our bright and innovative department members who keep up on trends in policing suggested using a new web site called [propertyroom.com](http://propertyroom.com) to dispose of our property. Instead of retaining the found property (almost two years in some cases), staff found a company that comes once a month with a large truck and removes our cleared property, posts it on-line, and gives us a predetermined percentage of the sale price. This new process involves a fraction of staff time and has proven much more cost effective for our department. We were one of the first departments in the Midwest to sign on to this service. Check out the web site for yourself: [www.propertyroom.com](http://www.propertyroom.com)

The second step we are taking to improve our property and evidence room management is reducing the time frame we retain found property. By cycling through and disposing of property that has not been reported stolen or lost more quickly, we are improving our space needs.

The third step we are taking to ensure we are operating our property and evidence room effectively will begin in early 2009 with the purchase of property room management software. Police agencies must always be able to secure, track, locate, and dispose of property and evidence at any time. This new system uses bar coding to manage and track all of our property and evidence which will allow us to locate and clear property more effectively and efficiently.

The space and storage challenges we face will continue to increase exponentially in upcoming years because of changes in evidentiary rules and procedure. One homicide case can fill an entire two-car garage. Last year's drug case

involving the Hot Gear Cool Grills store has filled up our entire West Duluth Station's Evidence room for well over a year. This case was recently closed involving the sentencing of over 20 individuals. We can now dispose of the property and once again utilize that valuable space.

The last area of focus with the property and evidence room is for us to get accredited through the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA). This process forces departments to ensure that all its policies and procedures meet current, stringent national standards. We will be entering into the accreditation process next month. With our policies and procedures recently updated, we anticipate it will take one to two years to successfully make it through the process. We know the standards set forth by CALEA will ensure we are in compliance with property and evidence standards that only the best departments in the country meet.

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