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EVIDENCE & PROPERTY ROOMS – LIKE FORT KNOX - cont'd.

There are numerous manuals developed for property room personnel to use as a guide, such as the *California Law Enforcement Evidence & Property Management Guide*. Manuals like these are full of excellent information on all important topics related to evidence storage, from chain-of-custody, how to organize a property room, policies for handling evidence, documentation protocols, facility design, audits/inventories, etc., and are written by experts in this field. Unfortunately, these guides do not address, nor solve, the problem of how to successfully manage the long-term storage needs of DNA, homicide, rape kits, oversized and/or odd-sized evidence and property once you run out of space.

Some have considered options such as cargo containers as a possible solution to address the need for additional space. However, cargo containers are NOT a good answer, and are notorious for increased risk of evidence contamination, as illustrated in the following:

Although the initial cost of cargo containers may “appear” to be an inexpensive alternative, they are in fact one of the worst alternatives for DNA evidence. While the cargo container’s initial purchase price is relatively inexpensive, include the costs to individually climatize (HVAC), alarm and monitor each cargo container. Finally, those cargo containers need to be stored some place as well...which still does not solve the long-term storage constraints of evidence and property rooms. Cargo containers are good for evidence that does not have DNA, and is not subject to temperature fluctuation because they are generally stored outdoors.

The traditional alternatives for long-term storage will also hit a wall: that is the wall with the big words painted on it, “SORRY, YOU’RE OUT OF SPACE (again).” So let’s solve this problem and stop staring down that loaded barrel of traditional expensive fixes, mends and repairs that may include the expense of installing more shelves, cabinets, or racking. At some point you will still run out of space, and in hindsight realize you’ve spent a small fortune that only ended up being a Band-Aid fix.

Solutions & Answers

The federal government has been using third-party storage services for decades. There has been a growing trend with state and local law enforcement to utilize private-sector companies to provide them with long-term storage solutions. Law enforcement agencies exploring this option should consider the following when looking for a long-term storage service provider:

1. Reputation & Experience - Ask for references. The supplier should have a proven track record and reputation working with law enforcement clients.

2. Chain-of-Custody - Knowledge and experience of proper protocols; integrate recommended IAPE property & evidence room policies and procedures.

3. Third-Party Employee Background Checks - All staff should have undergone a background check and be able to pass security clearances on an as-needed basis.

4. Specialized & Custom Storage, Packaging, Logistics & Freight - Ensure the supplier is able to provide you with customizable solutions; and ask for examples of this that they’ve done for other clients.

5. Strong Client & Employee Retention Rate - This will tell you a lot about the character of the business, the owner(s) and the level of consistency to expect from employees in the area of customer service.

6. Security & Strict Controlled Access for Long-Term Third-Party Storage - Strict controlled access to ensure evidence is not misplaced, stolen or compromised.

7. High Profile Cases - Although this should not be the final determining factor, it should be part of the evaluation and selection process, especially if you anticipate your agency being involved in or handling a high profile case. Determine if the supplier has experience handling evidence from high profile cases in the area of confidentiality, managing media inquiries, etc.

8. Supplier Responsiveness/Accessibility - Ensure that the supplier is able to respond to requests for pick-up and/or release of evidence in a timely manner, and sometimes with little notice.

Our law enforcement agencies deserve to have access to the best tools, methods and technologies out there in fulfilling their oaths as public servants to protect and serve the communities they work in. The old cliché that “crime doesn’t pay” isn’t quite true. Crime does pay – it costs a lot. This includes not only the high price paid by the victims of crime, but the high costs associated with prosecuting a case. Those costs include the long-term storage costs associated with the one of the most vital parts of the case – the evidence, especially DNA, homicide or sexual assault/rape kits. However, not only do the right third-party suppliers provide the needed solutions and secure, strict chain-of-custody, but they operate as an extension of law enforcement and crime labs’ evidence and property rooms, and offer the best economy-of-scale solution.

Phyllis Dixon is a business consultant and freelance writer. One of her clients, SafeStore, Inc., works directly with law enforcement, providing long-term storage of DNA evidence.

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