

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR PROPERTY & EVIDENCE

Property Room Standards

14. EVIDENCE, OTHER SPECIAL HANDLING

Cold Storage

Certain classes of property require special treatment for reasons totally separate from their value as evidence. These items may be dangerous, difficult to package or store, or perishable. The fact that an item is hazardous, difficult to package, or perishable causes no reduction whatsoever on the necessity for maintaining the chain of custody while it is held.

For this reason, the storage of perishable items is strongly discouraged, and should only be performed when it is evidence of a very serious crime. It is important to note that freezer space is extremely limited in many agencies and should be reserved for the preservation of DNA related evidence only when it is inappropriate to store these items in a room temperature controlled environment (65° to 75°).

Refrigerators and freezers should be equipped with alarms that indicate if the temperature rises above a designated threshold level. Contamination due to thawing after an equipment malfunction is unacceptable. The alarm should be monitored in a 24-hour location, such as the communications center.

Some items, such as those containing liquid blood samples, should not be frozen and may require refrigeration instead. Again, it is important to minimize these cases, as refrigerator space is also extremely limited in many agencies. Some blood sample vials have a preservative and may be stored at room temperature. Check with the local crime lab for local storage requirements.

Flammable Substances

By definition, a “flammable” is virtually anything that is easily set on fire. The storage of flammables should therefore be in an area away from the regular or indoor storage facility.

The following suggests the minimum standards for the storage of flammables:

- Location should be outside the main building, such as within a bulk storage area.
- Sealed (new) metal cans should be used to store arson evidence.
- Other containers may be used if they have airtight lids.
- Larger quantities of flammables should be referred to the local Fire Department for disposal. Photos and samples of the material should generally suffice.

- A metal storage cabinet or an explosion-proof locker specifically designed for this purpose can be utilized for the containment of flammables. The cabinet should have a locking mechanism, and should clearly be labeled “Flammable”.
- Storage scheme should be consistent with that of the overall property room scheme.
- Small quantities of fireworks may be kept in such a cabinet if the aggregate total of powder does not make it a destructive device. Explosives should never be stored in the Property Room, but should always be referred to the local bomb squad for disposal.
- In any area where flammables of any kind are stored, it is highly recommended that fire extinguishers, an adequate fire sprinkler system, and an action plan are readily available.

Syringes and Sharps

It is important to remember that the cut or puncture caused by a syringe, knife, or other sharp object is of significant concern due to the risk of infection from whatever biological or chemical contaminant may be on the sharp.

Syringes in general are being booked into evidence substantially less frequently now that their hazard is well known. They almost never are presented as evidence in court. Consult with the prosecutor to evaluate if the criminal case in question can proceed with a photograph and dispose of the syringe in a medically approved manner.

The hazard from syringes and sharps is very real, and directives need to insure that all needles are securely contained in an appropriate marked sharps container.

Bulk Items & Vehicles

A bulk item can be defined as any item that cannot be stored readily in the regular storage area due to size. It includes items such as tires, vehicle parts, carts, lawn equipment, bikes, etc.

It is recommended that an outside area be designed, or large warehouse obtained, to meet these suggested requirements:

- Bulk area should be enclosed by material that would prevent unwarranted entry such as a block wall with a standard metal gate.
- Area should be away from public view.
- Area should be such that items stored within would be protected from the elements.
- Gates should be able to accommodate large items.
- Storage scheme should be consistent with the overall scheme of the property unit.
- An intrusion alarm is suggested for such a building.
- The bulk storage area may also be partitioned for the storage of vehicles.
- Sufficient lighting should be provided for necessary security.

In the event that vehicles cannot be accommodated, a contract with a reputable tow yard for towing and storage is acceptable, if and only if the site remains secure, even from tow yard employees. Periodic inspections to ensure the preservation of said vehicles would be suggested. An alternative is to have a surplus cargo container for the temporary storage of a vehicle used in a major crime. This will ensure controlled access, but keep in mind that these containers have the possibility of extreme temperature variations.

Long, Slender Items

The storage of long, slender items such as poles, clubs, rods, sticks, batons, and the like have always created a nightmare for storing within the property room. This particular type of item usually ends up stacked one on top of another or standing up in a barrel, causing identifying tags to be damaged and creating huge problems when trying to retrieve them.

One solution to eliminate this would be an easily constructed box with a wire crosshatch at the top and near the bottom to allow items to stand up in an identifiable grid section. Another suggestion to store items vertically is to utilize large diameter agricultural PVC pipe. Items may also be stored horizontally on a shelf when the items are placed in case or chronological order. Yet another suggestion is to hang long items from a pegboard with rubber stretchcord. Whichever method is utilized, ensure that the items are in some type of order and easily retrieved.

Bicycles

Exterior storage is common, but not recommended because it leaves the risk of damage to the bike from exposure to the weather. Interior storage is recommended to avoid potential liability for damage due to weather exposure. Consider the use of hooks on an overhead pipe from which to hang bicycles to maximize space efficiency. Always separate bikes by evidence, found property and safekeeping.

Alcohol and Alcoholic Beverages

There are two considerations that need attention in most agencies related to the storage of alcohol and similar liquids. The first is a policy to reduce the overall need for alcohol to be stored as evidence, and the second is the procedure for the actual storage of the item presented as evidence.

It is an accepted fact that alcohol is rarely admitted in court as evidence. This holds true for kegs and cases as well as for individual bottles. Storing this contraband only hampers the efficient operation of the property room. A policy supporting the field dumping of alcohol at the location of the detention should be developed. Such a policy should include a mandate that the alcohol is actually destroyed in the presence of the violator. A photograph of the evidence container is preferable to actually booking the can or bottle. Consult with the local prosecutor prior to changing policy.

If the alcohol is part of the probable cause for an arrest, or is related in another critical way to another more serious crime, the evidence should be handled like any other evidence. Another situation prompting caution would be in the case of alcohol that has been seized pursuant to a liquor license violation. The evidence should be disposed once the criminal violation has been completed unless there is a specific request from the administrative licensing body.

If there is a need to store the alcohol as evidence, consider whether a sample of the beverage would be sufficient to take for analysis and/or evidence, and then whether the container is necessary as evidence.

On occasion, larger quantities of beer at teen parties are seized in keg quantities. These kegs are often seized to punish the party host, and not necessarily to hold the item as evidence. It is strongly recommended that this practice cease and that the beer be dumped at the scene instead of being booked as found property.

Jewelry

Jewelry consisting of fine metals, precious and semi-precious stones should all be handled with enhanced security in a manner consistent with its perceived value. Each piece of fine jewelry, or suspected fine jewelry should be individually documented and packaged. Storage should be relegated to an area with enhanced security, such as the currency vault.

Coin Collections / Stamp Collections

Collections of stamps, coins, baseball cards, and any other item of potential value greater than its face value should be stored in an area with enhanced security similar to that provided for currency. Anytime collections are to be disposed of they should be appraised first to determine the fair market value.