

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR PROPERTY & EVIDENCE

Property Room Standards

21. AUDITS

An audit is a formal periodic examination and verification of accounts or records to verify their correctness. In simplest terms, a property audit is an impartial review of the policies, procedures, and actions of an operation to determine whether or not they meet the recognized standards and the agency's own policies. The process is an audit of the system, not of individuals, even though changes may result in how particular employees should perform their duties. Ideally audits simply confirm and document a smooth running operation. The basic purpose of conducting a periodic audit is to ensure the continuity of the custody of property. Auditing on an on-going basis will enhance the safekeeping of property and minimize mismanagement. Failure to conduct regular audits enables problems that can easily lead to court cases being lost, loss of public confidence, personnel problems and possible financial loss. Policy should define when audits are to be conducted, by whom, and the scope of the audit.

The entire property system should be audited to ensure its integrity and its compliance with management directives and legal requirements. There are three different types of audits: basic, procedural, and organizational.

A basic audit determines whether or not legal requirements are being met.

A procedural audit examines and evaluates the efficiency and effective use of resources. This also includes attention to procedures and management policies.

An organizational audit examines and evaluates an agency's structure and encompasses plans, policies, and systems.

When practical, an internal audit should be conducted by a person(s) or unit that does not have responsibilities within the evidence operation. An inspections unit, a professional standards unit, etc. would be acceptable for the auditing procedure. This avoids an accusation that the audit team had a vested interest in covering up any irregularities. As an additional safeguard, unannounced inspections or random audits should be held at the discretion of the agency's chief executive officer. An external audit performed by non-employees of the agency avoids internal politics and provides a level of independence that cannot be obtained from any internal audit.

One audit method is the selection and review of one case file. The file is traced through the entire system to the current location. This method provides verification of the file and accuracy of all related forms. A second method entails the random selection of an item of property off the shelf. The auditor would trace it back through the case file again

verifying the file and associated documentation. A third random method consists of the selection of an inactive case file. The auditor would trace the file through the system to the property, or if purged, verifying that all documentation is correct. A physical inspection of the last storage place prior to disposal is recommended to insure validity.

Conducting a routine audit sends a message to everyone in the organization that property and evidence is important. In addition, outside auditors also provide a confirmation of in-house audit success.

As audits and inventories are intrinsic to a property room operation, there are areas of special consideration and assumptions to be made. Comparisons of descriptions do not always address the internal contents. If the evidence seal is intact the property system is presumed to be sound. If seals have been broken to verify contents, they should be resealed.

An audit of a particular piece of property, or the documentation remaining after the property is disposed of, should be able to tell the entire story of the property's contact with the agency.

It should answer the following questions for an auditor before being asked by a defense attorney:

- Who seized the property?
- Where, and at what date and time was it seized?
- Who documented it?
- Who packaged it?
- Who placed it in the temporary storage locker?
- Who retrieved it from the locker and processed it into the property system?
- Who put it away and at what time and date?
- Who signed the property out for court use, when, and what was the disposition?
- Who signed it out for analysis, who transported it, who analyzed it and when and with what results, and who transported it back to the property room?
- Who authorized release of the property?
- Who notified the owner to retrieve the property?
- Who released it, and when?
- What identification was obtained from the owner prior to release?
- If the item was destroyed, when and where did it happen, and who witnessed it?
- If the item was diverted to official use, who requested it, who authorized the transfer, and to whom was it delivered and when?
- Did the recipient of the diverted item sign for it?
- If the item was auctioned, is there a paper trail of when, where, and to whom it was it sold?

The integrity of the property system is largely based on the paper trail and how well the movement of property through the system is documented.