

# Computerize the Evidence!



In California, the *Los Angeles Times* reports that police have lost a major piece of evidence, a rope found tying up the body of a murdered Marine. They also no longer have the green plastic trash bag into which the body was stuffed. A Rhode Island man is acquitted of murder when his lawyer emphasizes to the jury that police have lost evidence that might have proved his client innocent. In Nevada, a case in which a girl was convicted of beating her father to death with a tire iron is overturned because police mistakenly released to her brother the gun with which she said her father threatened her.

While the national press concentrates on stories such as the loss of the "French Connection" narcotics, regional papers in the past year have regularly focused on local police departments that have lost evidence. When criminals go free as a result, citizens and police alike voice deep concern about the possible new crimes that can result.

The answer to the problem of the broken chain of evidence is not to try to make highly trained police into inventory clerks, according to Lt. Ronald Smith, commanding officer of the Suffolk County Property Section in New York. "The answer is to put a system in police hands that will do the job for them."

Business-oriented inventory systems won't do the job, says Jerry Boerner, public safety marketing director at Unisys. Features crucial to police operations are the establishment of

connections between pieces of evidence stored at separate locations, ways to make notes on calls received and methodology to track evidence destined for disposal or auction.

To solve the problem, Software Techniques, Inc., developed a computer application, the Automated Control of Evidence system (ACE), that runs on Unisys equipment. With input and direction from Lt. Smith, the system was brought on-line in Suffolk in January 1988. Smith says that it is "an indispensable tool" for dealing with property problems.

Smith deals with a tide of evidence that could overwhelm non-computerized operations: one hundred forty-four thousand new items connected with 18,000 crimes each year. The property section's warehouse, insured for over \$30 million, contains "just about anything that's ever been manufactured," Smith comments, including dozens of bicycles, ladders left behind by second-story men, tanks of propane used in vault break-ins, and a plastic Santa Claus stolen from someone's yard at Christmas. This is not to mention the huge bags of marijuana and thousands of envelopes filled with crack and cocaine.

The ACE system brings speed and efficiency to what could otherwise be the enormous manual task of categorizing and tracking all this evidence. When police bring property into the office—evidence from a crime or simply items that have been found and

turned in by citizens—it is entered onto an invoice that lists all items taken from the scene or that appear to be connected with a single crime. The officer in charge groups the evidence according to size and value, and assigns it via computer to a storage spot: jewelry in the vault, getaway car to the impound lot, TV set to one of the miles of department shelves. The computer prints labels for each storage location and cross-references it with the criminal, if known.

Each following event involving the evidence is computer-tracked. If there is a phone inquiry about the evidence, a note is added to the record. The computer generates letters to identified owners of the property that tell them how to reclaim items. The system tracks any maintenance that has been done to a piece of evidence and assesses the appropriate charges to the owner. The system's direct tie-in with the vehicle impoundment lot insures that a common event—the inability of police to locate immediately a vehicle that has been towed for parking violations—rarely occurs in Suffolk County.

Evidence that has no owner or is left unclaimed can be auctioned. The ACE system reviews all evidence and develops "pick lists" of items that are both released by prosecutors for disposal and unclaimed after legally-mandated time periods—a few months for items valued at less than \$500, up to three years for more valuable property.

Even at the auction, the auctioneer can check bids, compute taxes, produce receipts and record the names and addresses of buyers. The address file generates the mailing lists for the following auction. The system also tracks the destruction of narcotics, firearms and gambling machines.

"Any police agency that has a property room that is larger than a closet has the identical problems that we had," Smith commented. "The ACE system, which took two years to develop, has given our department the tool we need to support prosecutors, return property to rightful owners and dispose of unnecessary items." □