



## **The foundation for an effective and complete property and evidence system**

*Bar code labeling and tracking systems have made many property and evidence (P&E) functions more efficient and reliable, but such systems often lack one important ingredient for a truly effective P&E solution: a flexible underlying records management methodology that allows law enforcement agencies to use the same set of tools and procedures to manage the lifecycle requirements of both physical and electronic P&E, as well as all the paper and electronic documents and records associated with them. Without such a foundation, agencies will find it difficult to efficiently and cost-effectively meet the entire range of chain-of-custody requirements, both physical and electronic, in the rapidly changing world of P&E management.*

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## Property and evidence today

A busy and complex law enforcement agency encompasses up to 20 different “business functions.” These range from calls for service, incident reporting, case investigation, and property and evidence handling to equipment and asset management, internal affairs, and crime analysis.<sup>1</sup>

Managing the P&E business function is an especially thorny challenge for many agencies since P&E has a unique set of management requirements. Property can be just about anything—including weapons, cars, drugs, photographs, documents and literally dozens to hundreds of other types of physical items. The requirements here for properly managing a P&E function include developing ways to securely and efficiently check items in and out of property rooms, developing labeling schema that allow items to be stored efficiently and retrieved quickly, physically securing items against theft or tampering, and ensuring that items are handled according to strict legal and compliance mandates and jurisdictional retention or disposition policies. For agencies that routinely handle thousands of different items, this can be an enormous management challenge and require ever-increasing amounts of storage space.

A second challenge is managing the paper and electronic documents associated with property while ensuring that the links between property and their associated documents are never broken. These paper and electronic documents may be classed as property or evidence itself, in which case they must meet all the property lifecycle requirements outlined above. They can also be scanned images of property used in case investigations or court proceedings. Most importantly, they may be official records created and maintained to prove that property is handled by P&E functions and law enforcement agencies in general according to legal, regulatory, and jurisdictional mandates. Just as with physical property, if the chain-of-custody requirements for documents and electronic records are ever compromised, it can mean serious setbacks to important law enforcement work.

## The role of records management in property and evidence handling

Most law enforcement agencies understand the requirements for proper and efficient property management—an understanding that comes from decades of practice, often with many mishaps along the way—and few have stood still in terms of improving their P&E functions. While a few P&E management systems still require manual data entry into property and evidence logs and manual tracking of checkout and chain-of-custody requirements, many systems in use today leverage bar-coding technology to partially automate these processes. These systems automatically print out bar codes with basic information about items as they are checked in; assign items to a location in the property room; allow property managers to scan when these items are checked in or out by case investigators, court personnel and others with authorization; or note when they are moved into long-term storage for eventual destruction, return or sale. This information is automatically captured in databases, which often can be queried to determine the location of specific items in or outside of the property room. The databases also provide a record of how items have been accessed and by whom. There are several dozen P&E systems vendors in the U.S. marketplace who offer such capabilities, many of whom consist of ex-law enforcement personnel who have commercialized systems they developed while on active duty.

<sup>1</sup> Standard Functional Requirements for Law Enforcement Records Management Systems, Law Enforcement Information Technology Standards Council (LEITSC), 2003

Bar-code printers/scanners and a bar-code database, while a giant leap forward over purely manual systems, usually do not form a complete property and evidence solution, however. What is often missing from such systems is a strong underlying records management foundation that allows law enforcement agencies to treat everything handled by a P&E function—from physical property to paper and electronic evidence to paper and electronic records of property handling—as the records they actually are: records that must be tracked in the physical and electronic world and which must meet legal, regulatory and jurisdictional records management lifecycle requirements. These records must also be managed with automated records management workflow practices that make it easy to store, locate, and manage records in a way that reduces space requirements, makes P&E personnel more efficient, and allows agencies to reduce long-term storage requirements.

P&E handling and strong records management are not traditionally associated with each other, but the two go hand in hand since property and paper and electronic records all have a similar set of lifecycle management requirements. These include proper check-in and storage, whether it's into a property room or a file room; adequate controls over how items are accessed and by whom (and it makes no difference whether it's physical property or paper and/or electronic business records); and adherence to retention or disposition policies dictated by legal requirements and space considerations. Just like different types of property, different types of records must be securely stored for certain periods of time and—if a business or law enforcement agency wants to avoid the bottomless costs of storing every record or item of property forever—disposed of or returned when it's legally safe to do so.

These records management requirements can't be overlooked, according to a definitive report from the Law Enforcement Information Technology Standards Council (LEITSC).<sup>2</sup> The LEITSC cites a long list of needs directly related to records management, including:

- Descriptive information about an item of property or evidence, including its source;
- Ways to link items to case files;
- Historical information about the custody and control of items;
- The current status or location of items, either in central property rooms or remote facilities;
- Links to related items tracked in the system;
- Proof that evidentiary chain-of-custody requirements are met;
- The disposition of property managed by the system, with timed events to notify property custodians when property items will be released, destroyed or sold at auction. The disposition history is maintained for a specified time period or may be indexed for future investigative purposes; and
- Scanned photos and images of property and evidence and related electronic documents that aid in the investigation of cases and can be accessed when needed by clerks' offices and court personnel.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

In addition, the agency's records management system (RMS) should support a variety of standard and ad hoc reports, including:

- Chain-of-custody histories
- Property summary reports
- Property item details
- Released property reports
- Property inventory reports
- Property disposition reports
- Vehicle impound forfeiture reports
- Case-closed evidence reports
- Evidence location summary reports
- Audit reports

### **Hardwired versus flexible solutions**

Both the types of information that must be tracked by P&E and the reporting requirements they must support impose heavy requirements on their underlying records management foundation. How well do most P&E systems meet these requirements? The answer depends on the type of system.

"Homegrown" P&E solutions that adapt database technology used elsewhere in the jurisdiction rarely have the flexible and powerful underlying RMS technology needed to track and manage thousands—or in the case of large jurisdictions, millions—of physical and electronic property and evidence items and their associated records according to even the most basic evidentiary chain-of-custody requirements. Rather, these systems are simple databases with limited functionality for queries and reports that require extensive customization to make more advanced queries and reports available. In addition, such systems are difficult to upgrade and enhance, and they are all but impossible to support when employees who developed them leave the force.

Low-end vendor systems emphasize physical bar-code tracking, but they, too, may offer only limited RMS support for searching, reporting, proving chain of custody and automating standard operating procedures. Often, this functionality is "hard-wired" into such systems, making customization difficult. It has been estimated that between 80–90 percent of property and evidence requirements are similar from agency to agency, but the 10–20 percent that require special attention are often the most critical ones.<sup>3</sup> These special requirements may be difficult to accommodate with low-end systems.

P&E systems that are difficult to customize and that force an agency to work a certain way, often at odds with long-established procedures, will encounter employee resistance and often end up unused. The underlying records management foundation is what gives a P&E system the flexibility to meet specific agency workflow needs—fields, for example,

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

can easily be added or modified to reflect specific types of data capture, reporting and records linkage needs that more accurately reflect how an agency operates. Without this flexibility, systems that emphasize physical tracking at the expense of unique workflow requirements rarely live up to a vendor's billing.

Few such systems include both physical and electronic records management. The latter is increasingly becoming a "must have" for mid-sized and larger agencies. Some of these systems also have the same support problems as homegrown systems if a vendor goes out of business or is acquired—both frequent occurrences for companies in this size range.

Some high-end vendor systems are quite comprehensive in terms of P&E functionality and can support law enforcement agencies that handle thousands of P&E items, but, again, this functionality is "hard-wired" into their software. With these systems, there is only one way to do property and evidence tracking and management—the vendor's way—and if individual agencies need a different or modified approach, it either requires extensive and expensive customization or it can't be done at all. That leaves the agency with two unpalatable options: change the way they work to conform to the software or pay for additional customization. This inflexibility can directly be attributed to limitations in the underlying database and technology of such systems, and it's why implementations are often so frustrating for mid-sized and large law enforcement agencies.

### The right solution for today

Flexibility is perhaps the most critical core requirement of a good property and evidence system. Individual law enforcement agencies have years of experiencing handling property and evidence. Many have developed their own unique workflows and processes to meet specific chain-of-custody requirements and jurisdictional challenges. The agencies need property and evidence systems that can be mapped to the agencies' practices and requirements, not ones that force the agencies to follow predefined processes built into the software. This is a function of the flexibility of the system's underlying records management technology. If a specific property and evidence tracking or reporting requirement is needed, or if an existing process needs to be changed, the P&E systems are easy to customize. Other core requirements for PE tracking and records management include:

- **Security**

Security is achieved by P&E functionality that controls access to property and evidence by content type and is based on security roles that limit different personnel to different levels and types of access.

- **Reliability and efficiency**

Both are achieved though a combination of features, starting with the automation of processes that were once manual, and the automatic enforcement of rules and requirements when items are checked in and out of property rooms over their chain-of-custody lifecycles. Depending on the system, other features that improve reliability and efficiency include:

- Chain-of-custody procedures with digitized signatures for tracking control and auditability that reduces or eliminates evidence-mishandling claims;
- A sophisticated inventory management system that makes it easy to locate items instantly;
- Automated retention schedules that reduce storage space requirements;

- Standard reports and flexible ad-hoc reporting that make it easy to monitor, manage and report on evidence and related case information;
- Automated monthly inventory samplings that reduce or even eliminate annual audits;
- Digital imagery functionality that saves huge amounts of time over having to physically check evidence in and out;
- Hard and soft evidence compliance that means that both physical and electronic evidence is available using only one system interface, making both easier to manage;
- One-to-many relationship links that tie one piece of evidence to many incidents or crimes or cases, giving authorized personnel simultaneous access to evidence and associated cases instantaneously; and
- Predefined detective case and workflow management that ensures that property and evidence is linked with case files, making access to case information fast and easy, so there's less time in court.

### Scalability and extensibility

The same property and evidence system can support the needs of the smallest law enforcement agency as well as the largest if its underlying structure is scalable and extensible. Scalability comes from the ability to handle thousands to millions of physical and electronic entities. This may be important in jurisdictions that are experiencing rapid growth.

Extensibility comes from a single system that can be deployed for a specific purpose and extended into other areas as new needs arise. For example, a law enforcement agency can start using bar-coding and records management technology for equipment and asset management, such as tracking police vehicles and their contents, and extend the same system into property and evidence tracking. In other words, a jurisdiction can start small and extend the same system into other areas without purchasing and implementing additional software or hardware.

In fact, when tied to an RMS, a P&E system with a strong and flexible records management foundation can support both property and evidence and other law enforcement functions, such as:

- Incident reporting/field contact
- Investigative case management
- Traffic management reporting
- Citations
- Civil processing
- Protection orders and restraints
- Permits and licensing
- Equipment and asset management
- Analytical crime analysis

Beyond law enforcement, the same RMS foundation can integrate records management requirements across departments and spans of control, including records management requirements in courts systems, clerks' offices, health and human services agencies, and others. This can be important since an increasing number of cities and counties are under pressure to implement jurisdiction-wide information management and access systems to provide better constituent service, increase efficiency and contain costs. Such jurisdictions may find that they need solutions that are both:

- Bottom up—They offer comprehensive property tracking and records management features in a modular and scalable fashion that allow law enforcement agencies to grow both the size and scope of their systems.
- Top down—They can be implemented as part of a larger RMS that meets and integrates the records management needs of law enforcement with the related records and case file management needs of other city or county agencies.

### The SmeadSoft approach

SmeadSoft Property and Evidence with Records Management isn't the only system available with these features, but it is the only system built on Smead's industry-leading records management technology, which is in use today by tens of thousands of government users and which successfully integrates physical, paper and electronic records management in a flexible, easy-to-use fashion. Property and evidence tracking and management is a logical extension of Smead's records management expertise, which has evolved and expanded over time (Smead is a 100-year-old company) to include the following hallmarks:

- SmeadSoft can allow jurisdictions, if they desire, to standardize on one platform for all records and case file management requirements, including property and evidence and other law enforcement requirements.
- SmeadSoft manages paper, physical items, and electronic records in one system and database with the same workflows and user interfaces.
- SmeadSoft P&E can easily be tailored to enhance established law enforcement agency workflows and expanded in terms of scope and functionality over time without extensive customization or re-architecting.
- SmeadSoft solutions for government agencies are designed in cooperation with the agencies themselves. SmeadSoft Property and Evidence, for example, was designed in cooperation with county and municipal law enforcement agencies to reflect real-life process flows. As a result, it's easy to learn and intuitive to use for officers, investigators, legal personnel, property and evidence room managers, and others.
- SmeadSoft has a large professional services staff and extensive government experience. When it comes to property and evidence, this is important because vendors must be able to analyze specific jurisdictional needs and deliver systems that meet these needs—not systems that force changes to standard operating procedures and well-developed processes. And since law enforcement agencies' needs change over time, organizations need partners who can easily support these changes without requiring new applications or technologies. The ongoing consistency of vendor support is also crucial. Because jurisdictions are using these property and evidence systems to mitigate risk and ensure the proper handling of items over the items' entire lifecycles, unreliable vendor support can disrupt law enforcement operations dramatically and expose agencies to expensive consequences.

## Summary

Managing property and evidence poses unique challenges. Property comes in many forms, including physical and electronic forms, and different types of property have different storage and chain-of-custody lifecycle management requirements. Added to this is the burden of creating, tracking, and storing physical and electronic documents associated with individual items of property and ensuring that the links between property and their associated documents are never broken since discrepancies between the two can lead to legal chain-of-custody challenges and impede the work of law enforcement agencies. For agencies that routinely handle thousands of different items, this can be an enormous management challenge and require ever-increasing amounts of storage space.

Bar code labeling and tracking systems have made many property and evidence functions more efficient and reliable, but such systems often lack one important ingredient for a truly effective P&E solution: a flexible underlying records management methodology that allows law enforcement agencies to use the same set of tools and procedures to manage the lifecycle requirements of both physical and electronic P&E, as well as all the paper and electronic documents and records associated with them. Without such a foundation, agencies will find it difficult to efficiently and cost-effectively meet the entire range of chain-of-custody requirements, both physical and electronic, in the rapidly changing world of P&E management.

SmeadSoft P&E combines state-of-the-art bar-code-based property tracking and imaging with industry-leading records management functionality. This enables it to meet the needs of law enforcement agencies for flexibility, security, reliability, extensibility, and scalability in P&E environments that contain both physical and electronic property and their associated paper and electronic records. The SmeadSoft system is also comprehensive and extremely modular, so law enforcement agencies can start with the most-needed capabilities today and easily add additional capabilities over time.

SmeadSoft also provides key elements that contribute to successful P&E implementations but are often overlooked. It has a large consulting and professional services staff with extensive government experience. And it is part of an industry-leading organization with one hundred years of records management experience.



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