Sheriff's Department Keeps Order With Bar Codes

▲ **Tracking evidence and stolen property is made easier with a portable bar code solution.**

For most companies, inventory-tracking errors may seem like life-or-death situations, but for the Lake County (IL) Sheriff's Department, life-or-death has much more literal implications. To manage all criminal evidence, personal effects, and lost items, this Sheriff's Department turned to bar coding.

The department's evidence facility typically receives two types of property. One type is evidence to be used in the investigation of a crime or in a court presentation. The other type is recovered property, such as lost-and-found items. Once property is received, it must

The Lake County Illinois Sheriff's Department uses Eltron TLP 2742 label printers and Zebra PT400 portable printers to track evidence and stolen property.

be entered into the department's computerized system to identify what is in inventory and how it got there. Traditionally, after sealing an item in an evidence bag, the officer would fill out a handwritten property control form to request that the items be submitted into property control. The property control form includes all information about the item: the case number (coinciding with the report the officer will complete), the nature of the incident, the time and date that the item was collected, the location of the offense, the location at which the item was collected (if different), the name of the victim or suspect, and the property owner's information (in the case of stolen property).

The officer also provides an identifying number to sequentially record many individual items recovered at each scene. Finally, the officer includes a brief description of the evidence itself. Besides being a very time-consuming task – a new form must be completed for each item – the information on this form was only as valid as the legibility of the officer's handwriting. After completion of the form, the information would then be manually entered into the computerized system.

Manually Tracking Moving Evidence

Every time an evidence item is moved – either in and out of the department or between officers – the action must be manually entered into a ledger book. The information in the ledger is periodically entered into the computerized system. Individuals looking to retrace the steps of an item must search both the computer files and the ledger.

"With millions of dollars in drugs and money and the like coming through each year, it was a huge job for us to track and manage all of the items in our property control system," notes Sergeant Robin. "We have more than 300 officers on duty and a major crime scene can result in about 200 pieces of evidence."

Sergeant Robin and the Sheriff's Department, early in their planning process, connected with Porter Lee Corp. (Schaumburg, IL), an automatic data capture (ADC) system integrator specializing in police departments and crime labs. Porter Lee demonstrated a prototype of a system at the Lake County Sheriff's Department that would change the way that evidence is recorded and tracked.

Bar Codes Are Key To Tracking Solution

At the core of the system is bar coding. "The goal is to manage and record the flow of evidence while it is in the possession of the department," says Smith. "Now, each time you place an item on the shelf, rather than manually logging it into a book, you scan the bar code label at that location, then scan the bar code label on the item."

Rather than handwriting all of the vital information onto a form, the officer keys the same data into a dedicated terminal by completing the fields on the screen. Once completed, the system automatically prints a bar code label from one of four Eltron TLP 2742 label printers. The label is placed on the evidence container, then scanned with a Percon scanner. The officer chooses a secure evidence locker for temporary placement of the item prior to filing. Using the same scanner, the officer scans a bar-coded tag on the locker to alert the system of the evidence location. Not until the item and the locker are both scanned does the officer relinquish responsibility for the item's whereabouts. Once in the locker, the item is in the secure custody of the two people who have access to the locker – Sergeant Robin and the property manager.

To ensure that the labels hold up, Porter Lee has specified Zebra's Trans Matte 3000 label stock – a smooth-coated label with an all-temperature adhesive. Porter Lee

has also provided a solution that prevents evidence contamination at a crime scene. For complicated crime scenes, such as homicides and major traffic accidents, detectives work at the scene with laptop computers and Zebra PT400 portable label printers. Evidence is tagged and secured immediately. Upon returning to the station, the laptop data is uploaded into the system and the evidence is entered into property control.

"When we go out to a major crime scene, we sometimes have to track 200 items or more without a power outlet or even a car nearby to use as a power source," said Sergeant Robin. The combination of desktop and portable printers has enabled the Lake County Sheriff's Department to successfully monitor the movement of every piece of evidence. It does so without the cumbersome nature of ledger books, which had been the standard of the crime-fighting community to date.

'Impeccable' Chain Of Custody

"Process improvement, tracking accuracy, time savings, and increased security are the goals and results of these systems, with improved community service as an added bonus," adds Smith. "Before, if you called to ask your police department if they found your wallet, they'd either recall it from memory or offer to look for it and call you back. But if they're using our system, the officer can just type in your name and know immediately if they have the item and exactly where it is stored."

"The bar coding and computer tracking of the items and the amount of information you can store is just incredible," concludes Sergeant Robin. "For a court presentation, the state attorney's office will request a chain of custody, which shows the movement of each item in evidence. Today, the detail we can provide is phenomenal because the evidence is bar code labeled and then scanned each time it is handled. The chain of custody is so impeccable, it can't be disputed." ❏