



CITY OF PALO ALTO OFFICE OF THE CITY AUDITOR

July 19, 2005

The Honorable City Council
Attn: Finance Committee
Palo Alto, California

Results of Police Property and Evidence Rooms Inventory

SUMMARY

The Palo Alto Police Department conducts a periodic internal inventory/audit of its property and evidence rooms. The purpose of our audit was to independently assess the adequacy of the Police Department's review. In our opinion, the review was properly conducted. Furthermore, all 100 of the items randomly selected for review were found or accounted for. Recognizing that some recommendations from the 2003-04 Santa Clara Grand Jury's *Inquiry into Police Evidence Rooms in Santa Clara County* are still outstanding, we are not making additional recommendations at this time.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The Police Department's property and evidence rooms (property rooms) are located within the Police Department on the A level of City Hall. The Police Department also maintains off-site storage in the City of Palo Alto. Two property/evidence technicians maintain the Police property rooms. Database records identify all evidence and other items held for safekeeping, and show when items were released, destroyed, or transferred.

On April 20, 2005, staff from the City Auditor's Office observed two Palo Alto police officers not connected with the property evidence function as they conducted an unannounced inventory/audit of the Police Department's police property and evidence room. The Police Department conducts periodic inventories/audits of the property rooms to ensure the integrity of the property system is maintained through proper documentation of the movement of property and chain of custody. The last inventory/audit was performed on June 16, 2003.

For the inventory, the two officers selected a sample of 100 out of 8,840 items identified in police reports taken from January 1, 2003 through December 31, 2004. The officers selected items from a cross section of crime report types and storage areas. The items inventoried included currency, guns, fingerprints, computers, photos, medicine and drugs, receipts, tapes, wire cutters, biological materials, prints, credit cards, and other items.

A case number was orally given to one of the two evidence technicians. The evidence technician retrieved a hard copy of the property sheet; reviewed the chain of custody notations; and retrieved the property from its stored location, if applicable. The Police Officers physically inspected the property to ensure that the items matched what was notated on the property sheet. If an item had been released, destroyed, auctioned, donated, or turned over to revenue collections, the officers reviewed documentation of that action on the property sheet (including date, time, and signatures).

If a hard copy of a property sheet was not available, the technician queried the computerized database, reviewed the scanned document, and determined the final disposition of the items. In all cases, the items had been properly released, destroyed, auctioned, donated, or accounted for.

In our opinion, the Police Department's inventory/audit verified that the property room technicians were properly maintaining the property system, properly documenting the movement of property, and maintaining the chain of custody. Although the space is limited and crowded, the technicians were very organized and knew where everything was located. The records and logs were well maintained; documents were complete, accurate, and accessible.

GRAND JURY ITEMS

As stated above, the 2003-04 Santa Clara County Civil Grand Jury conducted an *Inquiry into Police Evidence Rooms in Santa Clara County*. The report included 7 findings and 10 recommendations.

Office automation: According to the Police Department, funding for a bar-coding system has been identified and solicitations for a vendor are underway. The bar-coding system will reduce the possibility of data entry errors. Additional scanning capabilities may also be desirable to ensure efficient handling of the property sheets with final disposition. Upon implementation of the bar-coding system, a total inventory will also be conducted (as recommended by the Grand Jury).

Property Rooms Storage Facilities: Although the evidence technicians have made effective use of the property rooms, the existing storage space is still too small for the amount of evidence and data stored. As a result, the 2003-04 Santa Clara County Civil Grand Jury rated Palo Alto's facilities a "D". Long-term storage needs are being addressed in coordination with other local jurisdictions and through consideration of a new building.

We appreciate the cooperation and assistance of the Police Department staff during this review.

Respectfully submitted,

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