



AUDIT OF PROPERTY AND EVIDENCE

Mesa Police Department



OBJECTIVES

This audit was conducted to determine whether effective controls are in place to ensure that property and evidence are properly documented, secure and available when needed; and ensure compliance with applicable policies, statutes, and other requirements or recommended practices.

BACKGROUND

The Mesa Police Department's Evidence Section is responsible for the intake, storage, and disposal of property and evidence. This includes safeguarding and maintaining the integrity of property and evidence and chain of custody of all property that comes into their possession. Property collected by the Evidence Section includes items collected as evidence, found and unclaimed property, or items kept in custody for safekeeping. This includes, but is not limited to, cash, jewelry, guns, narcotics, vehicles, bikes, blood and urine samples and other evidence related to crimes, such as assaults and homicides. During the period between July 1, 2021 through June 30, 2022, there was an average of approximately 54,255 items received at the property and evidence storage locations.

The Evidence Section has developed its own departmental policies and procedures, which detail the requirements for handling property and evidence. However, the Evidence Section also adheres to evidence management principles supported by the International Association for Property and Evidence (IAPE) and the Arizona Association for Property and Evidence (AAPE). The IAPE provide recommended standards for handling property and evidence as well as providing education and training whereas the AAPE provide ways for property and evidence professionals to communicate and share information and ideas, such as common issues that affect the safety of property and evidence personnel and the security and integrity of evidence they manage.

SUMMARY OF OBSERVATIONS

1. Property and evidence items authorized for destruction were not disposed of in a timely manner.

CONCLUSION

In our opinion, the Mesa Police Department's Evidence Section has effective controls in place to ensure that property and evidence are properly documented, secured, and available when needed. However, the Evidence Section should improve its controls to ensure that property and evidence items are disposed of in a timely manner. For additional details, please see the attached Issue and Action Plan.

ISSUE AND ACTION PLAN

The Evidence Section does not have adequate controls in place to ensure property and evidence items are disposed of in a timely manner.

What We Found

The Evidence Section is responsible for the disposal of property and evidence, which includes the release of property to owners and the destruction of items. Property and evidence that cannot be released to the owner are disposed of in various ways. For example, drugs and illegal firearms are destroyed (burned) at an off-site destruction facility and other items of value, such as jewelry or firearms that have not been tampered with, are sent to auction. However, the Evidence Section does not have adequate controls in place to ensure items authorized for disposal are destroyed in a timely manner. Specifically, during the audit, the following issues were identified:

- As of January 20, 2023, there were 3,165 items that had been authorized for disposal by a case agent/officer but were still pending removal from the items' current storage locations by an evidence technician.
- During the period between September 30, 2022 and January 11, 2023, there were an additional 3,819 items that were authorized for disposal by a case agent/officer, were removed from their current storage locations, and placed in a separate drug burn prep location. These items are waiting to be verified by a verification team to ensure all items are present and accounted for. Once the verification process is complete, the items are packaged and sealed in boxes and moved to a secure location until the boxes can be transported to an off-site destruction facility. All 3,819 items were finally verified on January 12, 2023, which took place more than three months after the Evidence Section completed its last verification process. These packaged items have been moved to a secure location and are waiting to be transported to the off-site facility to be physically destroyed.
- As of January 12, 2023, there were 30 boxes remaining from the previous drug transport/burn, which occurred on October 6, 2022. The destruction facility limits the department to burn only five to ten boxes per scheduled trip, which resulted in the 30 boxes still waiting to be transported and physically destroyed at the facility.

What It Should Be

According to the Evidence Section Supplemental Manual 3.6, *Disposition and Release*, "Property/evidence may be destroyed when mandatory retention requirements, as outlined in EVI 3.1 Property/Evidence Retention Requirements, have been met and all reasonable attempts to notify owners have been satisfied." In addition, according to EVI 3.6, "Property/evidence may be

destroyed when illicit drugs and paraphernalia, which are not needed as evidence, are submitted by members with a status of destruction.”

Why Does It Matter

Maintaining a backlog of property and evidence increases the risk for potential fraud, theft, and misappropriation. In addition, according to the IAPE standards, “The property room inventory should be kept free of items that are no longer needed in order to avoid the need for additional storage space and staffing. The timely and appropriate disposition of property is extremely important to the efficient management of the property room. Overcrowded evidence rooms generally require more staffing to manage simply because the size of their inventory has a tendency to slow down routine operations involving evidence, storage, and retrieval”.

What We Recommend and Management’s Action Plans

Recommendation #1-1: The Evidence Section should revise its existing policies and procedures to address the timely disposal of property and evidence, such as:

- Defining specific time periods and/or quantity thresholds to initiate the disposal process, including the removal of items that have been authorized for disposal but have not yet been removed from their current storage locations and items that have been placed in a separate prep location but are still waiting for verification and final processing.
- Establishing a transport/drug burn schedule that is conducive to the number of items authorized for destruction.

Action Plan #1-1:

Improvements to controls are under review and necessary changes will be implemented however, there was a number of outside factors that contributed to the backlog of items pending disposal such as the implementation of a new Records Management System (RMS) which did not provide a built in disposition/disposal process, the impact of COVID 19 and reduced staffing, the drug destruction company ceasing to allow police departments to dispose of contraband at their facility, the researching, testing and securing of a new drug destruction company and finally, logistical challenges with coordinating 4 different departments (Evidence, Forensics, Policy and SWAT) to participate in drug verification and disposal events.

As of 02/22/2023, there are 8 remaining boxes from the verification on 10/06/2022 and 38 boxes remaining from the verification on 01/12/2023 for a total of 46 boxes pending transportation to final destruction. A destruction event is scheduled for 03/01/2023 and we have been authorized by the facility to bring 30 boxes for disposal. Another destruction event is being scheduled soon to dispose of the remaining 16 boxes.

As of 02/22/2023, there are 4,663 drug and/or drug paraphernalia items that were authorized for disposal, been removed from their storage location, and placed into a drug burn preparation

location. These items and any additional items will be verified on 03/07/2023 and subsequent destruction events scheduled as the facility allows.

1. A review of the following policies is underway to determine necessary revisions pertaining to the disposal of property:

DPM 3.2.20

DPM 3.2.20A1

EVI 3.1

EVI 3.2

EVI 3.6

EVI 3.7

EVI 4.1

2. Work in collaboration with the Policy and Accreditation Unit on policy revisions.
3. Revisions will include that drug burn verifications will be scheduled when the total number of drug and drug paraphernalia items in a drug burn preparation location reaches no more than 2,000 items.
4. Work in collaboration with the destruction facility to establish a schedule for bi-monthly destruction events to help prevent future backlog of drug and drug paraphernalia items for disposal.
5. Work in collaboration with the Policy & Accreditation Unit and Forensics to review whether it is feasible to develop a predetermined schedule for drug verifications.
6. Work in collaboration with the Policy and Accreditation Unit and SWAT in prescheduling future destruction events as established by the destruction facility.
7. Work in collaboration with PDIT, RMS Leaders and other stakeholders to review and determine if an automatic electronic disposition process could be implemented within the current RMS system.
8. Continue to temporarily utilize overtime for seasoned Detectives to review cases for possible disposition.

9. Continue to temporarily utilize overtime for Evidence Technicians to reduce the number of items pending destruction.
10. Work in collaboration with the Planning and Research Unit to review current staffing levels in Evidence and determine if the creation of additional positions is justified.
11. If supported by the staffing analysis, we will submit a decision package for additional FTEs next fiscal.
12. Meanwhile, to assist with a 100% pre move inventory, reconciliation of discrepancies, disposal of authorized evidence, pack 'n' move, a 100% post move inventory and initial set up and staging, we will request for the utilization of temporary employees starting July 1st.

Individual or Position Responsible: Evidence and Supply Supervisor Lisa Tautimez
Senior Evidence Technician Rhonda Thomas
Senior Evidence Technician Cortni Enders

Estimated Completion Date: 8/31/2023

SCOPE

The scope of the audit was the period from July 1, 2021, through June 30, 2022. However, some procedures performed consisted of observing current property and evidence operations and testing current inventory data.

METHODOLOGY

To accomplish our objective, we performed the following:

- Interviewed department personnel.
- Reviewed policies and procedures and observed processes to gain an understanding of department operations, including the intake, storage, and disposal of property and evidence.
- Performed field observations of the property and evidence intake and verification process.
- Performed an inventory by selecting a sample of property and evidence, including firearms, narcotics and currency.
- Reviewed physical security measures and employee access to the department's various property storage locations.
- Observed the department's records management system, including reviewing user access to the system is appropriate and edits made to property and evidence records are logged.
- Reviewed disposal reports and other related documents, including documentation of items released to owners and items authorized for destruction.

AUDIT STANDARDS

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.



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Audit Team

Michelle Hute, Senior Internal Auditor
Sherry Thomas, Internal Auditor

City Auditor

Joseph Lisitano, CPA, CIA

Mesa City Auditor's Office

Phone: 480-644-5059

Email: auditor.info@mesaaz.gov

Website: <https://www.mesaaz.gov/government/city-auditor>

Copies of our audit reports are available at:

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