Fairfax County Internal Audit Office

Fairfax County Police Department
BEAST-ILEADS Property Room Audit
Final Report

November 2013

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Background

The Police Department Property and Evidence Unit is the repository for property and cash acquired and held by the Police Department during the course of investigations or found and turned in by citizens. The property room staff currently uses two systems to perform functions including disposition tracking, chain-of-custody history, and query/reporting. The property module of the ILEADS system was installed in January of 2013. The older system, the Bar-coded Evidence Application System (BEAST), is kept in place to maintain old cases and new cases are added to the ILEADS system. Currently there are more than 146,000 property items in the BEAST database and 46,000 items in the ILEADS database including firearms, narcotics, jewelry, electronics, and currency. As older cases are closed and the associated property is disposed, returned to the owner, turned over to the state, or archived, the number of items maintained in BEAST will decrease. There is also a purge process that will decrease the number the number of old items. Both systems are accessible from all police district stations.

Executive Summary

Our audit found the Police Property and Evidence Unit to be managed effectively with adequate internal controls. The unit was in compliance with department policies and procedures concerning property inventory and had received accreditation from the Virginia Law Enforcement Professional Standards Commission.

We found that the application system controls including audit trails, data backups, and access controls were in place and functioning effectively. We also found physical access controls were adequate to safeguard the inventory of over 100,000 items held in the property room and our tests of the physical inventory using a statistical sample did not identify any missing items. The records maintained for property and evidence were generally accurate and complete.

Our audit found the following:

- The documented procedures for removing items from and returning them to the property room for court and other purposes did not require officers to complete PD Form 7s. We noted instances where items had been signed out to officers for court purposes for an excessive period of time.
- The procedures for storing and maintaining property and evidence at the stations until picked up by the property room staff were not standardized, resulting in weakened security/accountability for the property. The police department currently has a project in place to review and improve this process.

Prior to the conclusion of this audit, the police department has documented the procedures for removing items from and returning them to the property room. The rewritten general order and the standard operating procedures covering this function have been verified by our office and meet the objectives of this finding. Additionally, the police department has also rebuilt the physical storage areas and standardized the

procedures for the temporary storage of property and evidence at the stations. We have verified that these changes have been made. Therefore, all findings on this report have been cleared, and a management response is not required from the auditee.

Scope and Objectives

This audit was performed as part of our fiscal year 2013 Annual Audit Plan and was conducted 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.

The scope of this audit included an examination of internal control and a physical inventory of randomly selected property items. This project covered the period from January 1, 2012, through December 31, 2012. Our objectives for this audit were:

- To determine that the property and inventory function was managed and operated effectively and efficiently.
- To evaluate compliance with county, state and/or federal laws and regulations, as well as department policies, procedures and guidelines concerning property inventory.
- To determine that all property and evidence was stored safely and adequately safeguarded from loss, fraud, or other mishandling.
- To ascertain that complete and accurate records of all property and evidence including chain of custody were maintained.
- To ascertain that adequate application controls were in place and operating effectively.

Methodology

Our audit approach included reviewing the applicable system documentation, checking for compliance with internal county policies and procedures and any applicable state and federal regulations, interviewing management and staff of the Police Department Property and Evidence Unit, and observing the processes used to maintain the property and evidence systems. We also conducted a physical inventory of a randomly selected sample of items comparing them against information contained in the automated databases. Statistical sampling was used.

The Fairfax County Internal Audit Office is free from organizational impairments to independence in our reporting as defined by Government Auditing Standards. We report directly and are accountable to the county executive. Organizationally, we are outside the staff or line management function of the units that we audit. We report the results of our audits to the county executive and the Board of Supervisors, and reports are available to the public.

Findings, Recommendations, and Management Response

1. Property Out-to-Court

There were a significant number of items listed in BEAST and ILEADS as out-to-court for a long period of time for which it was not known whether the property was kept by the court or was still in the custody of the officer. When property or evidence is removed from the property room to be taken to court, the officer should complete a PD Form 7 and return it to the property room with or without the property or evidence after court. If the court has retained the property or evidence, the form must be signed by the clerk of the court. If an officer was removing property or evidence for another purpose, such as case review, no written instructions were found for how this must be done. Additionally, the language of the procedure for out-to-court removal indicated that it was optional.

Recommendation: The current procedure (Chapter 9, Report Writing Manual) should be re-written to <u>require</u> that the procedures be followed rather than suggesting that they 'should' be followed. Also, procedures need to be written to describe the required steps to follow for removing property/evidence for other purposes. A requirement to periodically review the reports of items removed from the property room and not returned should be included.

Before the conclusion of this audit, the police department documented the procedures for removing items from and returning them to the property room. The general order and the standard operating procedures covering this function have been rewritten. We have verified that the procedures meet the objectives of this finding. No management response is needed.

2. Storage of Property and Evidence at Stations

The process of storing and protecting property and evidence in police stations' temporary storage areas until it was picked up by the property room staff was not standardized, and the areas were not properly secured due to the number of staff having access. There was a project in place to assess what needs to be done to improve the property and evidence management process at these stations at the time of this audit.

Recommendation: The current project should be completed, including recommendations stated in the re-inspection document to the Virginia Law Enforcement Professional Standards Commission. These procedures should include limiting property access to the officer who collected the property and the property room staff picking it up.

Before the conclusion of this audit, the project had produced several important changes in the physical infrastructure of the station property rooms and in the property management process. Our office performed test work to verify these changes. The stations are now in compliance with standards. No management response is needed.

Other Observations

The police department was in the process of deciding whether to continue using the ILEADS property module, go back to using only BEAST, or attempt to find another solution to satisfy the needs of the property and evidence management function at the county. The ILEADS property module was missing key functionality that the BEAST system has and was not as useable for the staff of the property room. Location information on items could not be stored directly in the system and required a location code crosswalk in order to locate the item in the property room. The ILEADS module is no longer supported by the vendor, and reporting capabilities were lacking in some areas according to those who use the data. Additionally, the decision to keep data in two different databases added an element of complexity not present before and decreased the efficiency of operations.

Before a decision is made regarding software for future use by the property room, there are several considerations that should be properly resolved:

- The issue of data conversion must be dealt with. There are already two disparate databases containing property and evidence information. When bringing in a third, the information in those two databases should be converted.
- Compatibility with existing software used by the police department should be a prime consideration.
- The various users of information from any new system should be consulted as to their reporting requirements before software is purchased.