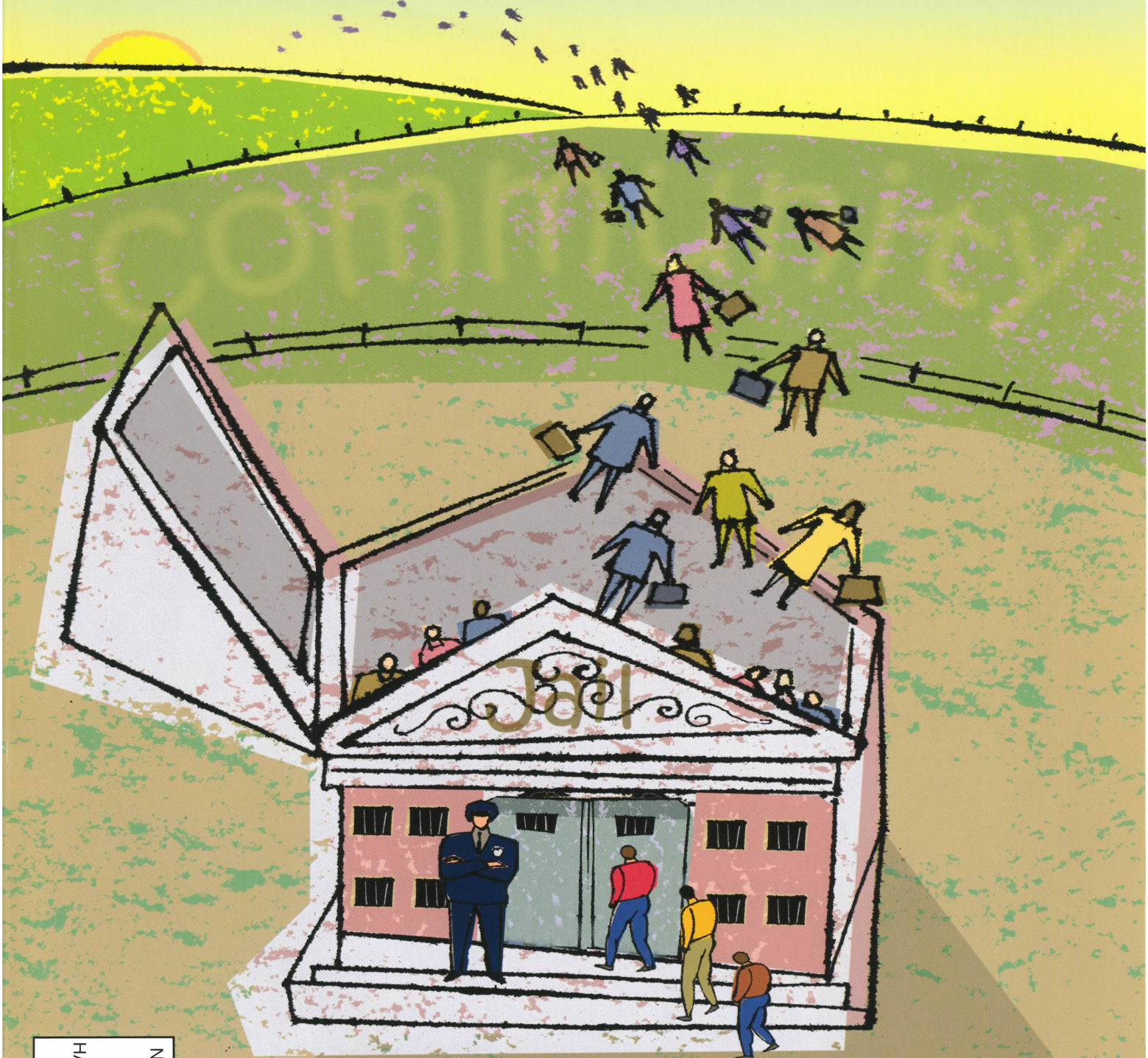


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Jails in the Community

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Innovative Property Storage Solution



in Tampa, Florida

To the uninformed, the challenge of collecting and storing an inmate's personal property seems like an easy one. Collect the property, store it, and return it when the inmate is released. What could be easier? However, those of us who deal with this challenge on a daily basis know that the reality is much different than the perception. Apart from the sheer amount of property received each day, one must factor in the fact that inmates will misrepresent the value of property (this Timex was a Rolex when I gave it to you!), human error, and the sad fact that not all property room personnel uphold the trust put in them by their superiors. The unfortunate fact has always been that property can be, and is, lost or stolen. This fact causes enough uncertainty that every lost property claim has to be taken seriously. This results in hundreds of lost man-hours spent investigating lost property claims. The Orient Road Jail, part of the Hillsborough County Jail system in Tampa, Florida, is redefining how jails will store and catalog inmate property. Since putting its innovative new system into use on March 18, 2004, there has not been a single lost property complaint involving the new system.

CLIFFORD BROWN SR. AND CORY HOOVER

Lost Property Investigation

An investigation into a lost property claim is a time consuming, frustrating job. While the average stay of one of our inmates is 24 days, some may have been incarcerated up to a year or longer. This sometimes makes it very hard to trace and reach a definitive answer on any claim. After interviewing the complainant, the respective property room officer follows procedure. But these people process the property of 150 inmates a day on average, and it's impossible for them to remember every piece of property received. What you are left with is basically a case of "he said, she said." At that point, the investigating officer becomes a retail detective. If he doesn't have a receipt for the item, which he rarely does, the officer needs to start contacting local stores. We try to find out what the product retails for, how much it depreciates, and so on. Now it becomes a game of "Let's Make a Deal," and the officer begins negotiating with the inmate for the replacement cost of the item. The end result is time and money spent for the investigation of an incident that, real or fraudulent, in a perfect world would not have existed.

Precious manpower was being spent on these duties instead of more productive endeavors, and in July of 2003, the problem had gotten bad enough at the Orient Road Jail, Hillsborough County's main booking facility, that Captain Curtis Flowers set out to find a solution. Captain Flowers estimates that we spent over \$60,000 last year investigating and/or settling lost property claims; it was clearly a problem worth addressing. After searching existing methods of property storage, Capt. Flowers became increasingly convinced that no one had yet found a solution, and he would need to find one himself. The primary weak point in each system he researched was an intrinsic inability to prove that it had been properly secured the entire time it was in possession of jail staff. Eventually, he contacted a local packaging company for ideas. After meeting with Mike Kelley, a salesman, and discussing several options, Captain Flowers was shown an existing type of vacuum packaging used for retail applications. "As soon as I saw it, I knew that our problems were solved," says Captain Flowers. This meeting led to the development of the Guardian Property and Evidence Packaging System™ and the beginning of the end of lost property claims at the Orient Road Jail. Kelley says of Captain Flowers and the staff at the Orient Road Jail, "This machine and process would not be possible without the insights and inspiration of the folks at Orient Road, Captain Flowers in particular. He saw the possibilities of applying one of our systems to a new application, and he deserves a lot of credit as an innovator."

A finished piece consists of a poster board thickness of paper and a thin film of plastic bonded together, with all property except clothing, shoes, and larger items, vacuum packed in between. The paper and plastic are bonded together, trapping the property. Mike Kelley explains, "The beauty of this system is that it is completely tamper evident. To open that package to retrieve the property, the package must be destroyed. The paper and plastic bond together so strongly that the paper must be delaminated to

open the package. There is absolutely no way to open and reseal a package." Kelley goes on. "We recommend that the arrestee actually place his signature on the paper sheet before packaging. This seals his signature along with the property. The signature offers the inmate the secure knowledge when his property is returned to him that it has not been tampered with in any way. It also serves notice to anyone who would make a fraudulent claim that the package hasn't been opened, and because that can be proved, their con won't work."

How the Property Machine Works

The package is made using a simple machine. The property room officer places the property onto a 12" X 18" paper sheet and sets it on a perforated metal table in the machine. The start button is pressed, and a cycle is activated. After heating the plastic, the machine lowers it onto the paper board. Simultaneously, a vacuum sucks the plastic down, stretching it around the property and bonding it to the paper. Any jewelry, watches, or other fragile valuables are inserted into a small plastic bag before packaging. The bag protects the valuables from vacuum and the shrinking plastic, while still encasing it. After the cycle is completed, the operator removes the package from the machine and puts it into storage. The size of the sheet is such that it can be inserted into any existing system, from paper bags, and hanging bags to filing cabinets. The machine is so easy to use that total training time for the machine was a five-minute seminar. Mike Kelley explains, "We have made the machine as simple to use as possible. We have used the Orient Road Jail's experiences with the machine to make improvements to make the machine easier to use. For example, all adjustable controls are behind a locked cabinet. Any adjustments need the approval of the supervisor with a key. The operator now only needs to press a single button and the machine does the rest. After completing its cycle, the machine will rest until that button is pushed again. We've also introduced a table top model for those with limited space."

Up to this point, we at the Orient Road Jail used the standard sealed plastic bag method of storing property. Once an arrestee was brought into the main booking area, they were patted down and relieved of their personal property, which was then sealed in a plastic bag by means of a bar sealer and temporarily stored in a secure environment. Once the arrestees were ready to be booked, the property was retrieved and cataloged under the supervision of the arrestees, signed for, and held until it was known if the arrestees would be released on bail or incarcerated. If they were to be released, they signed a document stating that all their property was accounted for and the property was returned to them. If the arrestees were to become guests of the county, they showered and surrendered their clothes. The clothes were then put in a standard paper shopping bag along with the personal property. The paper bag was then labeled, stapled, and stored in shelving units. The weak point in the system was the lack of a tamper-evident storage system. Plastic bags can be cut and resealed, paper bags can be opened and restapled. While the

chances of this happening were small, they were real, and made every lost property claim at least credible enough to warrant an investigation.

After several trials to determine its viability, Captain Flowers purchased two of the machines and accompanying materials. One machine was slated for the main booking area and the other for backup. We think that the machine will be as valuable in the evidence room as in the property room. Because of the tamper evident nature of the package, evidence will have a secure storage space that can be dated and verified that it has not been tampered with. The results have been nothing short of amazing. We think this will revolutionize the way property and evidence is stored. Since we began using the system on March 18, we have not had a single claim filed when the system was used. My day (Clifford Brown) is still 60 percent occupied with investigating lost property claims, but they involve the property of inmates who were booked before the new system was put into place. We are looking forward to a few months from now when everyone who is released is handed their sealed package, and lost property claims become a thing of the past.

While this system is the most notable innovation, it is only part of the Orient Road revamping of its property storage system. The packaging is done in front of the arrestee who then signs an electronic signature pad to signify that the property packaged is the sum of his possessions. This signature goes into the arrestee's electronic file

along with a digital photograph of the property just packaged. We believe that the system protects both parties, and having the person present, witnessing the process, puts them at ease. They know their property is protected and photographed. The combination of photo, electronic signature, and new package has proved so far to be an unbeatable trio. We have seen a dramatic drop-off in the amount of claims filed because the arrestees can see that we are very diligent about cataloging, storing, and protecting their property.

Having started to solve the problem of personal property loss, we are now turning our attention to the problem of clothing and larger property. The property room is currently evaluating both a hanging bag type storage system and a box system that features sealable boxes that cannot be reopened without destroying the box. We are convinced that it is important to provide a more secure environment for clothing and property because if we can eliminate or at least reduce the amount of time spent on investigations, we can spend our manpower on other, more productive endeavors. ☺

Lt. Clifford Brown Sr. is a 30-year member of the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office and is in charge of inmate property for the jail system. He can be contacted at: clbrown@hcsco.tampa.fl.us

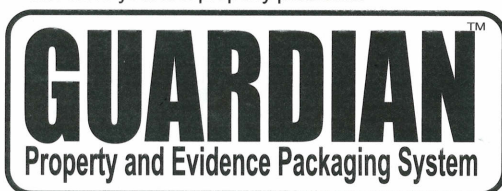
Cory Hoover is a packaging specialist for CPI/Guardian Packaging System and can be reached at (800) 299-2596 or at www.propertyandevidence.com

This Package Can Stop Lost Property Claims

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