

**BIG CHANGES NEEDED or GET A WHIFF OF THIS:
A Report on the Mendocino County Sheriff's Evidence Facility**

May 13, 2009

Summary

The Grand Jury visited the evidence facility located in Ukiah that serves the Sheriffs Department, District Attorney's Office, California Highway Patrol and federal agencies. We found that numerous improvements are needed to the systems that provide ventilation, fire suppression, back-up power, refrigeration and evidence storage. We noticed an abundance of evidence from closed cases that is awaiting proper disposal.

Background

California Penal Code §925 states *The Grand Jury shall investigate and report on the operations, accounts, and records of the officers, departments, or functions of the county...* On November 13, 2008, the Grand Jury undertook this charge and toured the multi-agency evidence room in Ukiah.

Methods

The Grand Jury toured the facility and interviewed personnel on site.

Findings

1. The Mendocino County evidence facility is located in Ukiah and serves the Sheriff's Office, District Attorney's Office, California Highway Patrol and federal agencies.
2. Ventilation of the facility is inadequate to prevent strong pervasive odors, including those from stored marijuana and human remains.
3. There is no overhead sprinkler fire suppression system.
4. An abundance of evidence from closed cases awaits appropriate disposal.
5. Current shelving is inadequate for efficient evidence storage.
6. Evidence refrigerators are outdated. They are not energy efficient and lack adequate seals to contain odors.
7. There is no generator or secondary source for electrical back-up.
8. Evidence is recorded in a card file. Staff reported that computer files are not backed up.
9. The building is privately owned and rented to the County for \$3,000/month.

Recommendations

The Grand Jury recommends that:

1. the County relocate the evidence facility or negotiate with the building owner to:
 - a. upgrade the ventilation system; (Finding 2)
 - b. install an overhead sprinkler fire suppression system. (Finding 3)

2. the Sheriff's Department:
 - a. install a space saving storage system; (Finding 5)
 - b. secure energy efficient refrigeration units with hermetically sealed doors; (Finding 6)
 - c. provide a secondary source of power for emergencies; (Finding 7)
 - d. install back-up systems for electronic and hard copy information that would be kept at a secure off-site location; (Finding 8)
 - e. assign staff, on a part-time basis, to assist with disposal of released evidence. (Finding 4)

Discussion

Jurors found the two staff members to be helpful, cooperative, and informative. The facility appeared to be understaffed for the scope of work and volume of evidence. The facility is inadequately equipped to ensure a healthy environment for staff, efficient evidence storage and optimal back-up of critical information.

The Grand Jury questions whether it would be the best use of public funds to make the needed capital improvements to a privately owned building rather than relocating to an alternative leased facility or constructing one that is designed for the purpose and meets *green* building standards.

Required Responses

Mendocino County Sheriff (All Findings; All Recommendations)

Board of Supervisors (All Findings; All Recommendations)

Mendocino County Chief Executive's Office (All Findings; All Recommendations)