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TOPICAL FEATURED

Running out of room - Cops seek more space for crime scene evidence

By LAUREN COFFEY Staff Writer
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SUN PHOTO BY LAUREN COFFEY Civilian Cmdr. Rick Fitzgerald opens one of the many places evidence is kept for the North Port Police Department.
By LAUREN COFFEY /Staff Writer

It's a trending sight in local evidence rooms.

Boxes stacked on top of each other, with plastic bins brimming full of the bagged remnants of crimes that put people behind bars.

The crimes keep coming, but free space is hard to come by at police departments in North Port and Punta Gorda.

As Deputy Chief Chris Morales sits down to discuss the mass amount of homicide evidence at the department, more is on its way.

Erica White had just been stabbed multiple times at a North Port house and all the evidence collected will have to sit in the department for 100 years.

Florida law dictates all evidence from homicide cases must be kept that long.

That can include everything from vehicles, clothing and bone fragments, to a tree stump like in the case of the Hog Trail Murders.

And as North Port Civilian Cmdr. Rick Fitzgerald gingerly walks through the rows of boxes stacked up to the ceiling, the problem is clear: North Port Police are running out of space.

They're not alone. So is the Punta Gorda Police Department, which is also looking for different storage options in the long-term.

“We’re trying to optimize what we have, we’re trying to use everything as efficiently as we can,” said Fitzgerald, who oversees daily operations of criminalistics, property and evidence, records, and telecommunications. “So don’t think each of these totes is a single case. There could be several different pieces spread across several different totes. We’re trying to get what fits, so we use the space we have as efficiently as possible. Otherwise it would make it harder to walk.”

The problem

The Punta Gorda Police Department is also having issues with its current evidence storage capacity, as the city and the surrounding area has continued to grow.

“Between 2002, when our building was built, and 2017, we have seen a 61 percent increase in our evidence intake,” Lt. Dylan Renz said. “And just so far in 2018 we are seeing a 36 percent increase in the amount of evidence we bring in versus last year.”

The department is looking at new long-term evidence storage solutions, anticipating the rate at which officers bring in evidence will continue to increase going forward, Renz said.

In North Port, change is already happening.

The North Port Police Department is working with engineers now to create a complete expansion of the department, including evidence collection.

“People have been moved to accommodate growth,” Morales said. “I have sergeants that don’t have offices, that can’t even have closed-door private meetings with their staff to discuss private issues. So we’re making due and that’s why companies are coming out here basically saying ‘How did you guys do this?’ and ‘How did you guys keep up?’ So the growth is a definite concern and the space here is very, very small.”

The Police Department’s current office opened in February 2006, but the larger space would not hold up for long.

“When they built it, it was only going to be a couple years before we were at capacity,” Morales said. “They built this Police Department and no disrespect to the prior leaders, but what they projected was very low when – by the time this building was built – it was at today’s needs at the time.”

So now they are working on expanding the entire building, including where evidence is stored.

“Some people have bigger facilities and an enclosed area,” Morales said. “Unfortunately, we do not, which is why we need a bigger facility... These are the challenges and struggles we’re facing to expand.”

Right now the evidence is separated into multiple rooms: biohazard, long-term storage, recovered items and the drug and gun vault.

Evidence has to be kept for 100 years for homicide, at least seven years for burglary and can vary when it comes to the severity and type of sexual crimes.

“This whole block is a homicide involving a little girl,” Fitzgerald gestured with a sweeping hand movement to dozens of boxes along a back wall.

He was referring to the murder of 6-year-old Coralrose Fullwood, who was killed in 2006. One box marked “VHS tapes” stands out among the almost 1,000 pieces of evidence for her case.

“Whether it’s a high profile case or not has no relation (to how much evidence is kept),” Fitzgerald said. “It’s the type of crime.”

The growth

With population steadily increasing in the city, crime will inevitably increase, too — and so will evidence collected.

“We’ve been averaging a 9-ish percent growth (over 12 years) in the amount of items that come in versus what comes out,” Fitzgerald said. “So based on that and things that keep coming in, with more people in the city and more things happen, inevitably we will run out of room.”

In the past 12 years, the North Port Police Department increased its pieces of held evidence by 21,000 pieces, Morales said.

“We’ve probably had anywhere close to eight to 10 homicides, with probably 11 coming soon,” he said. The interview was conducted on Aug. 24: there were two more homicides in the city since that time.

According to Morales, in 2007 there were 9,280 pieces of evidence. At the time of the interview in 2018, there were 31,919.

Morales said he joined major crimes in 2000, and crimes began to increase about five years later.

“And then in 2005 we started having several homicides and that’s when I learned as a detective, working in conjunction with the state attorney’s office — I learned ‘Wait, we have to keep the car?’”

The protocol

To try and cut down on the evidence, the department can try to rid the space of evidence that has reached its statute of limitations.

But that process is also complicated.

If evidence was collected from a burglary, the suspect was caught, arrested, tried and then released from jail, the evidence could be destroyed.

Fitzgerald’s team will alert the officer of the potentially now-freed up evidence, the officer will say if they agree it can be released, and then will ask the State Attorney’s office and a judge. The State Attorney’s office owns all the evidence and has the final say. If they give the approval, then Fitzgerald’s team will take evidence to an incinerator and review its destruction.

According to Charlotte County Sheriff’s Office personnel, destruction orders are one way the agency makes due with the space they have.

“When it comes to storage, more space is always ideal, but our staff is efficient with destruction orders and works with the space that we have,” CCSO spokesperson Katie Heck said.

For homicides, pieces of evidence have to be kept even if a person is convicted of a crime. While all the forensics are lifted from the evidence directly after the crimes, pieces can be used for visual purposes if the defendant has an appeal.

“If someone is on death row — if Michael King goes through all his appeals — he can have an appeal at the very last minute and that’s by the act of the governor,” Morales said. “So technically we have to hold that up to his execution. But we keep it for 100 years as a rule of thumb.”



King murdered Denise Amber Lee, a 21-year-old North Port mother and wife. He was convicted and sentenced to the death penalty. During the trial, the car King used to transport Lee around was brought to the courthouse by Morales.

“(The jurors) walked around, they looked at it,” he said, adding the vehicle was used more to help the jury visualize the murder than as evidence proof at that point. “It was an instrumentality of the kidnapping and murder.”

With drugs, police officers used to have to keep every single piece — for example all 120 marijuana plants found in a bust and the grow lights at the scene — but can now just take samples and incinerate the rest.

Perishable items such as food and flesh have pictures taken for evidence. For the actual body such as bones, it is up to the medical examiner.

“The medical examiner determines what we do with the evidence,” Morales said. “And sometimes we do have bone fragments that we do keep and hold here but a majority of that — the body belongs to the medical examiner.”

But officers try their best to get rid of evidence and free up space when possible. If the evidence owner is an innocent person, the property would go back to them.

Drugs and weapons are set for destruction after following procedure. With found property, the department legally is required to put an announcement in the newspaper to give an opportunity for it to be collected. If it is not collected, the department gives it to a charitable organization.

The future

Morales and Chief Todd Garrison are working with engineers on the future police department — which goes beyond evidence collection and will expand in each department.

Morales was quick to state the IT department will specifically get attention it may not have in the past.

“The problem is when we built the place we really didn’t look at what the future was with technology,” he said. “IT was looked at a very small amount, where now it’s very large. So they need office space, they need server space. Everything they touch now: they scan it, they log it, that’s all IT-based. The days of putting a sticker on it with a handwritten case number are gone, it’s all electronic.”

And this time, the building plans will be built with the huge growth of the future in mind. In 12 years, the department hired 40 officers, so the force is up to almost 160 men and women. Projecting with feasibility and growth, North Port is slated for 170-190 officers.

“We’re building this police department with a 2030, 2040 build-out,” Morales said. “They did (previously keep growth in mind,) but I think they undershot what they believed we were going to be. And that’s what we’re doing with this feasibility study, is we don’t want to make the same mistake now. So we’re paying attention to our growth, of the amount of homes and entities and entertainment. Because it will impact levels of service for police but we’re also looking at what the history has taught us.”

Sun Reporter Anne Easker contributed to this report

Email: lcoffey@sun-herald.com