



PS-21

In-house digital photograph lab

With about 180 commissioned officers, the Boulder, Colorado (95,000), police department was not big enough to support an in-house laboratory to develop its forensic photographs. To develop a couple of thousand rolls of film each year, the department used to send a technician to a one-hour photo shop, where the technician waited for the photos to be developed and then brought them back to the department. But the advent of digital technology has allowed the department to equip all of its officers with digital cameras and to process, store, and print the photos in-house.

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Implementation notes

Leadership/staffing The department's use of digital photography was planned and implemented by a crime scene investigator who also teaches forensic photography. Two property and evidence clerks devote approximately one-quarter of their time to digitally processing the images.

Timeline The chief of police attended a conference in 2000 where the benefits of digital technology for law enforcement were discussed. He tasked the crime scene investigator with developing a proposal for bringing the technology to the department. The department purchased high-end computers, peripherals, and digital cameras in the spring of 2001.

Budget/funding The department used a local law enforcement block grant to support its costs of more than \$50,000 for the initial equipment.

Program description Once the chief accepted the proposal for digital imaging, the crime scene investigator-program developer wrote a set of standard operating procedures based on standards developed by the FBI. These procedures specify how original images are to be stored and





archived, who should have access to them, and how images could be enhanced. The procedures also addressed workflow issues, including how to log in the “flashcards” that store the images.

The investigator-developer obtained software training, and he and three other officers also received training from the Institute for Forensic Imaging. After the department initially purchased 12 very good digital cameras for 12 crime scene investigators, the developer-investigator spent three days training these 12 officers in the fundamentals of digital imaging, standard operating procedures, and how to use the cameras.

A few months later, the department purchased relatively inexpensive point-and-shoot digital cameras (costing approximately \$300 each) to replace the film cameras in the “beat bags” for each beat. The department offered half-hour classes to all patrol briefings in the use of the cameras. Every officer in the department has now been issued a point-and-shoot digital camera. The department stores images from the cameras on rewritable CDs or DVDs and prints images of up to 44" × 60" only when needed. Prints from some older cases have been scanned and added to the digital archive.

Results Using digital photography has sped up photo processing considerably, as images can be processed immediately. Within minutes they can also be shared via e-mail with prosecutors. The quality of the images is high because the cameras provide instant feedback on whether an image is in focus and properly composed. Instead of spending approximately \$15 for purchasing and processing each roll of film, the department spends as little as 10¢ for a CD or DVD, plus the cost of consumables (including printer ink). Although newer versions of the technology are now available, the department is using the computer equipment and all but one of the digital cameras it purchased in 2001.

