



Packaging Firearms

By: Mike Byrd

Choosing the Proper Packaging Medium

In methods of evidence collection, the proper handling, packaging and transporting of the individual items of evidence is extremely important for the evidence preservation. Choosing the wrong packaging medium can cause the risk of valuable evidence destruction. One of the main goals of the crime scene investigator or evidence recovery technician remains to be identification and the recovery of any evidence that will assist in that identification process. In recovering firearms, aside from the ballistics examination and analysis, there is the probability for recovery of fingerprints that will lead to the person who had the last contact with that firearm.

The first duty of the investigator recovering a firearm or weapon is personal safety and the safety of anyone who will come into custody of the item of evidence. The investigator then has the duty to preserve the potential evidence the item may reveal.

Many times the actions of a few can dictate the policy making affecting many. One such policy-making incident recently occurred. Having the access and ease of a local lab facility allows us to collect the evidence at the scene, and transport it to our office for proper packaging and submission through direct contact with the disciplines that will do the particular individual analysis.

The incident involved a firearm submitted with the weapon *not* being rendered safe. You can imagine the uproar that an incident of this magnitude would generate. Like the employee, The top priority of the employee, agency or department always remains to be safety and safety related issues. Often times an incident such as this will dictate a spin off of policy making without the aspects of all goals

and objects being given careful scrutiny and consideration.

The results of the policy making initiated that all weapons were to be submitted with a flex-cuff attached to the top strap of a revolver, or through the slide and ejection port of a semi-automatic to assure the weapon is rendered safe. The second policy required that all weapons collected be superglued at the scene prior to collection. The third required policy to be effected directed the weapon to be placed and submitted in clear plastic, to allow the technician taking custody of the weapon to view the weapon assuring its safety.

This final portion of the policy making change was questionable. I foresee no effect on the evidence if the weapon is being submitted or routed to the discipline for ballistic type analysis. If the weapon is being submitted for the purpose of fingerprint recognition or collection analysis, this presents a dilemma. I can already hear the teeth grinding from you savvy veteran investigators.

Experience and knowledge tells us that any item with the potential of latent fingerprint evidence, even if the prints have been fixed with superglue in the field, should not be placed and packaged in plastic. The friction from the item rubbing around inside the plastic packaging material will create an ability of scratching, removing and damaging any latent prints. Clear minds and creative thinking have to prevail.

This is where knowledge, experience, and innovative thinking comes into the decision making process. Each party involved has to be able to accomplish the full goal and objective through thought out revisions in policy making.

The weapon is rendered safe and is fumed in a chamber with superglue at the scene. A sturdy box is used as the collection and packaging medium. Several slits are put into the bottom of the box. This allows flex-cuffs to be inserted through the slits in the box to create safety straps around the firearm to secure it in place during transport. The top flaps on the box are removed and replaced with a sheet of clear plastic. Several small holes can be placed in the plastic to allow further ventilation into the box, if it is needed. The purpose of the clear top in the box is to create a viewing port that allows the receiving technician to verify the safe submission of the weapon.

Submission of weapons not able to render safe

Often times the investigator will be called upon to collect a gun that is rusted, jammed, or in a corrosive condition and *cannot* be rendered in a safe condition. We use a specially constructed gun box in this situation. The gun box is constructed with steel walls designed for protection during transportation from the scene and through the various disciplines of the lab.

The bottom of the gun box is designed with a pegboard and removable pegs for securing the weapon in place. If you use something like this please be sure *not* to insert a peg inside the trigger guard. The box is designed to avoid any opportunity of an accidental discharge during transport.

Learn to use the knowledge and experience to work within policy and change what will benefit everyone. We are human. Over the course of a career, mistakes will be made. The idea is to minimize and limit the mistakes that will be made.

(This article was found on www.crime-scene-investigator.net. The author works as a Crime Scene Investigator at Miami-Dade Police Department.)