

# THE Spectrum

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## Crime Lab Moves

by Michael R. Benham

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### Planning + Involvement = Success

Of the many sources of anxiety in a workplace, moving a work operation ranks very high on most peoples' lists. Typically, the demands for the operations' product or service continue; it is only the capacity to meet those demands that is interrupted. This is particularly true of a crime lab, where stress can run high even without the complications of a move, and where the demands for service must be met in a timely fashion.

This article examines the special considerations that apply to moving a crime lab. Three special challenges distinguish forensic lab moves from a typical workplace move: movement of specialized equipment, movement of evidence and the need to maintain critical operations. For each of these challenges, advance planning and getting the right kind of help are the keys to success.

### MOVING EQUIPMENT

The modern forensic laboratory is host to a vast array of equipment and tools, which often require highly specialized knowledge or qualifications to move. As an early step, make sure your equipment inventory is complete and up to date. If you do not have an inventory, create one. For the purposes of moving, each item should be characterized with the following information:

- Description
- Manufacturer

- Manufacturer's Serial Number
- Description of any service contract or warranty
- Dimensions
- Owner (i.e. the laboratory scientist or technician who is responsible for ensuring the equipment is operational)
- Requirements for closing calibration, powering down, disconnection, reconnection, powering up and opening calibration at the new site
- Special packing and moving requirements, including dimensions of the crated equipment
- Internal Identification Number

When a move is to take place, each and every piece of equipment should be labeled with the internal identification number, and responsibility for moving the equipment assigned, usually to the owner. One planner of a large lab move stated simply, "If it is not labeled, it does not move."

The equipment owner should decide whether the equipment is to be moved by internal staff, a manufacturer's technician or an outside mover and add that information to the inventory. Some planners suggest that three different color labels be used – for "movers," "staff," and "other" to help identify who is to move what.

An accurate inventory printout can serve as a move checklist, once for outbound items and again for ensuring that all items get delivered to the destination.

At the destination site, it is important that

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the spaces to receive equipment are the proper size and configuration and are equipped with the utilities they need, such as electrical, gas, vacuum, steam, etc. Hopefully, these items have been taken care of during the design and construction process, but some fine-tuning may be required and it is recommended that the receiving space be examined well enough in advance to provide time to make any needed adjustments. Send lab members to the new location in advance to check gas, electrical, water and other hook-ups. Again, the equipment inventory can be used to ensure all equipment has its own location and will fit.

### MOVING EVIDENCE

When it comes to movement of physical evidence it is absolutely essential to maintain the integrity of the evidence and to comply with legal chain-of-custody requirements. As with equipment, an accurate inventory is key and you will undoubtedly have one for your day-to-day activities already. One northeast crime lab used its inventory list to “check-in” items to a truck that was then locked up and treated as a sealed container. At the destination end, the same list was used to unload the truck and “check-in” its contents to the new evidence vault.

Some evidence requires special treatment. For example, bodily fluids and other items may require refrigeration. Hazardous items like explosives may require special handling and packing. The packing and loading of all evidence must be overseen by the manager of the evidence room who can make decisions about any special requirements.

Security for physical evidence is a must, and a minimum requirement would consist of a police escort of the sealed truck. The scheduling and routing of the truck should generally be restricted to a limited “need-to-know” list of people. Scheduling should take into account availability of the destination loading dock at the time of delivery to avoid unnecessary idle time and exposure. Basic security measures may need to be tightened if particularly valuable goods, such as cash, jewelry or drugs, are being transported.

### CRITICAL OPERATIONS

While it is desirable to minimize as much as possible any downtime associated with a forensics lab move, there are certain critical operations that must not be down at all. Examples include fire debris testing related to suspected arsons, drug testing, toxicology work and initial DNA screening. Prior to moving your lab, it is important to identify all critical services and have contingency plans for dealing with requests for those services.

One option exists where a lab has multiple instances of the same forensic capabilities (say, DNA Analyzers). In such cases, consider moving one machine, then another, so that both are not down at the same time. When in-house redundancy is not available, most critical operations can be provided by another facility. Independent labs, or other public forensic labs, may be available to provide back-up capabilities for cases that must be handled quickly, e.g. drug and alcohol toxicology testing or ballistics testing.

The key is to be aware ahead of time of those operations that must be backed up, and what contingency resources are reasonably available. Plan to call alternate suppliers and find out if they can supply your needs and meet your standards for quality and timing.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF PLANNING

As with most things, the best way to avoid problems associated with moving a crime lab is to *plan*. And the best way to plan is to ensure *participation*.

The planning of a move ought to start simultaneously with the design of the project. Many aspects of a move can be made much easier if accommodated during the design process. There are obvious things to consider like door and aisle way widths being sufficient to permit passage of incoming equipment, or a database center needing raised floors. Some things may be less obvious like the ability of an air handling system to serve a dozen fume hoods in addition to general building circulation, or the location of a gas hook-up for a piece of equipment that has not yet been delivered.

Creation of the project team should be done during the early design stages, and should be done in writing. While everyone is ultimately involved in the move, there must be a core of representatives who are charged with making sure that the interests of their constituency are met. It is critical to make it clear who each team member represents, what operations they will be responsible for and what time commitment is expected during planning and execution. Drafting a Project Charter helps clarify what is expected. Getting a clearly identified executive sponsor to sign off on the charter and team composition will prevent problems later. A project coordinator should also be ordained by the executive sponsor as having full authority to direct move-related activities.

There are many ways to structure your team, but the goal is always the same: full coverage of the lab operation. One forensics center choose to make the directors of each individual lab – ballistics, DNA, documents, controlled substances, etc. – responsible for the move of their particular operation. Centrally supplied functions included setting of standards, overall coordination and the procurement of move-related resources, such as architectural / engineering services, packing and moving services, decontamination, equipment installation, etc. The provision of such shared functions will typically be the responsibility of the project coordinator

A general announcement to all lab occupants should be made early. This should be done by the lab director to make it clear the move has executive sponsorship and to identify the project coordinator. The project coordinator must make sure that all those affected are aware of the upcoming move and the reasons why it is taking place. Assure lab workers that they will be kept constantly in the loop and will be invited to help in the planning. A well-executed move avoids surprises.

### **OUTSIDE ASSISTANCE**

Early planning should also anticipate any needed outside assistance, professional movers being perhaps the most important. When soliciting outside help, plan to specify the move in as much detail as possible. A complete and accurate equipment and furniture inventory is essential at this point. The specification should note the location of large or heavy items and the characteristics of pathways – e.g. door and aisle dimensions, floor surfaces and load-bearing capacity – leading from the equipment to the loading dock. If equipment requires de-installation and re-installation, this must be noted along with an indication of whether the mover is responsible for such work or needs to be working with a third-party.

Soliciting a moving company should be a two-step process. First, advertise a request for qualifications (RFQ) well in advance. This document should specify the types of specialized work that will be required, but does not need to be detailed about quantities or timing. The RFQ enables you to separate the companies that are capable of doing the work from those who cannot.

A very important part of the RFQ should be a request to the suppliers asking them to tell you the information they need to submit a meaningful bid on your project. All too many requests for fixed-price proposals have yielded less-than-satisfactory results because the request was not specific enough. The list of information requirements provided by the vendors can be used as a guide by your procurement specialist writing the request for proposal (RFP).

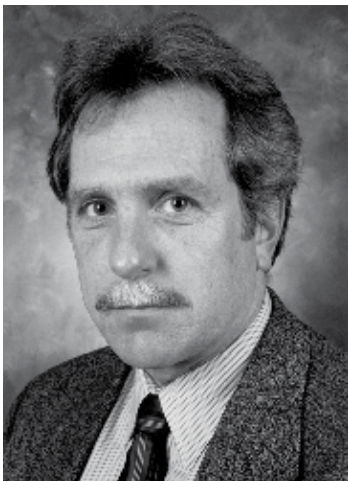
With knowledge of what a mover needs in order to provide an accurate bid, a complete inventory and your precise timing requirements, you now have the basis for writing a tightly-specified RFP. You should also specify required experience with moving labs, along with references, insurance requirements, communications requirements and the procedures for dealing with move day contingencies. Floor plans for the origin and the destination and information about loading docks and their availability should also be included.

With specific respect to moving evidence, make sure your mover has experience with these kinds of moves and is aware of the particular requirements. Don't hesitate to check with past clients to learn of any problems that may have occurred.

Another source of assistance can be the manufacturers of equipment you are moving. Equipment may require protection that only the manufacturer is in a position to know about or supply. The manufacturer, more likely than a mover, will be aware of special power-down, power-up requirements. There may be a need for pre-move and/or post-move calibration of instruments. In general, the same expertise required for original installation is needed to move and re-install your high-end forensic technology. Manufacturers' services can be expensive however, so decide carefully when such help is truly needed.

By carefully specifying the nature of the move, by planning well in advance, and by getting the right kind of help, your move can be anxiety-free. ●

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