FORAY TECHNOLOGIES™

CASE STUDY
Montgomery County Sheriff's Office

Montgomery County Sheriff's Office gains efficiency, cost savings with ADAMS Software for managing physical evidence, digital and latent assets

Crime laboratories across the country struggle to effectively store and manage property and evidence, and especially digital assets—digital images, PDF files, audio files, video files, etc.—whose volumes are expanding. Accomplishing this without the benefit of an electronic solution can be overwhelming. This is what Montgomery County Sheriff's Office in Conroe, Texas, discovered over several years.

In 2005, Montgomery County Sheriff's Office began examining options for automating its digital asset storage, as well as physical and latent evidence. The agency has a crime laboratory, photo laboratory, and a latent laboratory that also processes firearms. In addition, Montgomery County has its own property and evidence unit that receives and processes evidence from the 28 law enforcement agencies within the county.

ADAMS Software Chosen for Managing Photos, Physical Evidence

One of the sheriff's offices first, significant challenges involved photo lab operations that were being handled manually. For example, latent evidence was being captured with Polaroid cameras. In the property and evidence department, documentation of incoming evidence was accomplished using paper evidence submission forms. The forms were difficult to find once completed. Evidence items were simply placed on any shelves where they could fit.

According to Lt. Damon Hall, finding an electronic property and evidence solution at the time, while a high priority, was delayed because the photography challenge—converting to digital photography from film and receiving large volumes of digital photos for various cases—was escalating. Among the solutions closely considered was Foray Technologies' ADAMS Crime Scene Photo/Video solution that is designed for storing, securing, locating, and controlling digital evidence gathered at crime scenes.

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The solution allows browser-based viewing of cases and digital evidence, along with comparisons of originals and processed copies. Also, videos or photos can be located by case number, crime type, date of crime, among other parameters. Initially, Montgomery County chose this solution. Later, the sheriff's office also adopted Foray's ADAMS AFIS Connect. "This allows us to take a print digitally and transmit it from Crime Scene Photo/Video straight to AFIS Connect," noted Lt. Hall. In 2008, he added, "No agency was doing that because our state did not allow it. But Foray said it could be done." As a result of the two installed Foray solutions, handling and storage of digital photos and evidence is now completely digital, which has boosted efficiency of operations.

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A Crime Scene Investigator evaluates friction ridge detail on document that was developed with Ninhydrin.

Big Role for ADAMS Latent Case Management Solution

Montgomery County Sheriff's Office needed to have Foray customize its solutions for photo assets and evidence collection and storage. Shortly after this was accomplished, Foray introduced its ADAMS Latent Case Management and ACE-V Documentation Module. This solution allows users to create and maintain complete and consistent records that include annotated images of latent prints and exemplars, observations and other data tied to the ACE-V process.

.The sheriff's office added this solution to the other Foray software in place. Although ADAMS Latent Case Management was certainly helpful for documenting reports on images of latent prints which could be then dropped into Crystal Reports, "I saw much more in it," Lt. Hall said. "We could use this for our firearms reports, basic crime scene reports, vehicle processing reports, and DNA processing reports." At the lieutenant's request, Foray even taught him how to build these reports so that he could produce them himself. "Now, we can use the Latent Case Management program for everything we do here," Lt. Hall said.

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A forensic specialist in the crime lab at Montgomery County Sheriff's Office examines a firearm that was received as evidence. The Foray ADAMS Latent Case Management software used by the crime lab is helpful for processing evidence items like this firearm, and for generating reports.

Easily Process and Store Digital Evidence

By acquiring these critical Foray software programs, the sheriff's office's main crime lab and photo lab can more effectively and easily process and store digital evidence, and quickly make this available to defense attorneys and their forensic experts.

Another advantage is just the speed and ease of using this capability. "My photo lab may have 50 or 60 cases that have come in from patrol, and the digital photos from these cases can be generated from the photo lab in an hour and a half from loading all of them up," Lt. Hall said. "If these photos had been on film, it would have taken three days." The Foray software resides in two of four servers each with 200 terabytes of space.

Barcoding Keeps Tight Leash on Evidence Status

The ability to know where property and evidence is stored and its status at all times is crucial for any law enforcement agency. Montgomery County Sheriff's Office is no exception, which is why automating these functions was so essential. By using ADAMS Property and Evidence software, the agency has completely organized its property and evidence room so that the process of checking evidence items in and out, or just determining the status is more streamlined. Key to all of this is the ability to barcode each item. Adds Lt. Hall: "We took it a step further. Over the years, we've been able to put all of our old evidence into the software so that we now know everything we have."

ADAMS Property and Evidence Solution Will Go Mobile

Montgomery County plans to expand its efficiency with the ADAMS Property and Evidence solution by going mobile with it. "We're going to start pushing this out to patrol units whereby instead of having officers submit a paper form, they can access the ADAMS program on their in-car computer and enter property items and print a receipt with all the information," Lt. Hall said. "They can sign the receipt and drop that into the system so it shows the evidence is ready to be received for a particular case. And, this is all legible because the whole process is electronic," Lt. Hall added.
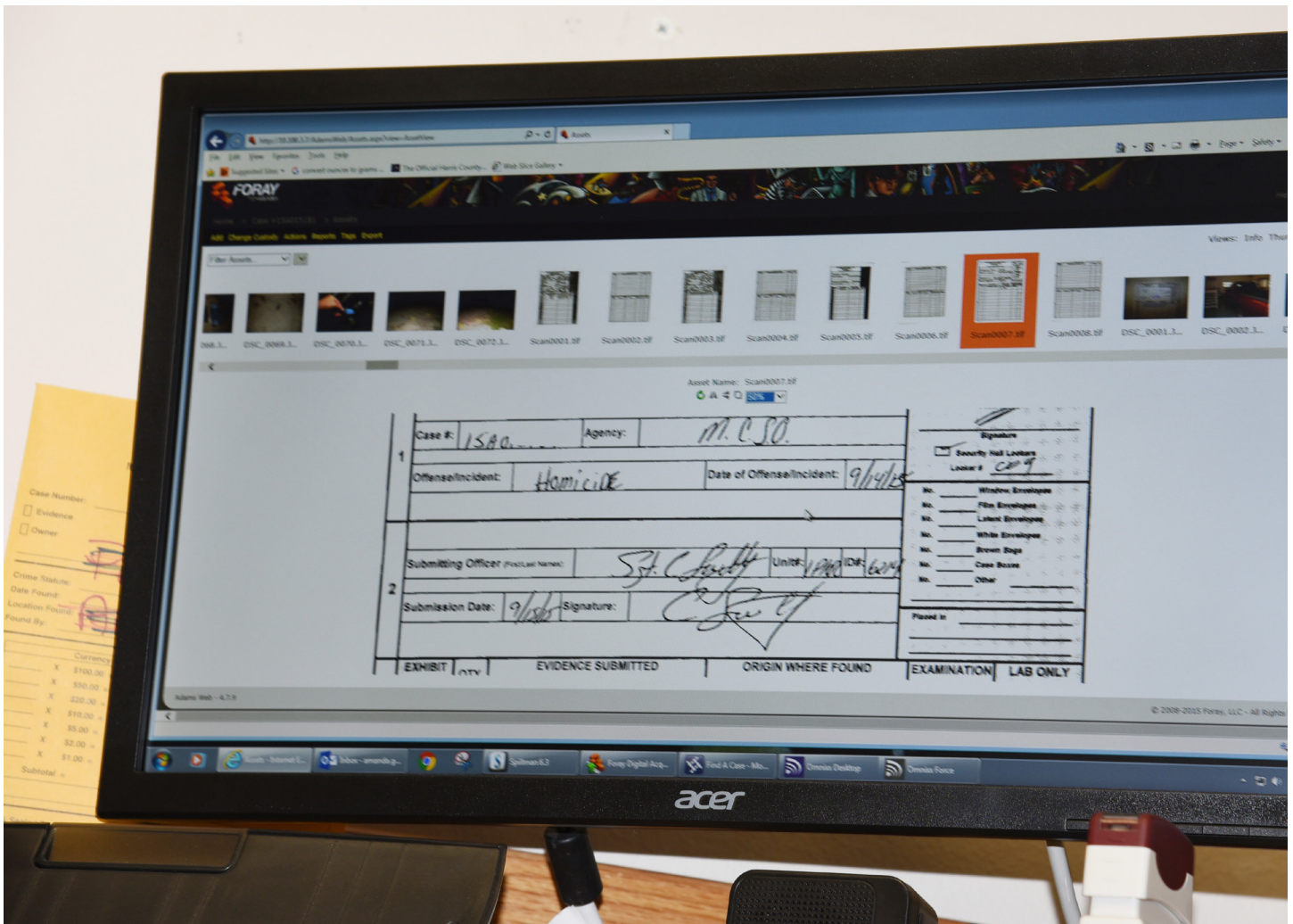
Audit Trail Tracks Assets

An integral part of each ADAMS solution used by Montgomery County Sheriff's Office is that all evidence and images automatically become part of an audit trail. The ADAMS Crime Scene Photo/Video is a good example of how this function works and why it is so valuable. Photo lab personnel can upload assets to the software as well as open these assets in Photoshop. "All the steps you take in Photoshop are copied in an audit trail that transfers over to ADAMS Crime Scene Photo," Lt. Hall said. "So, if you were ever questioned about it on the courtroom stand, you would be able to go there to show the steps." All of the Montgomery County's crime scene investigators also use ADAMS Crime Scene Photo and can upload digital asset files onto a repository in a server. However, they cannot manipulate these assets.
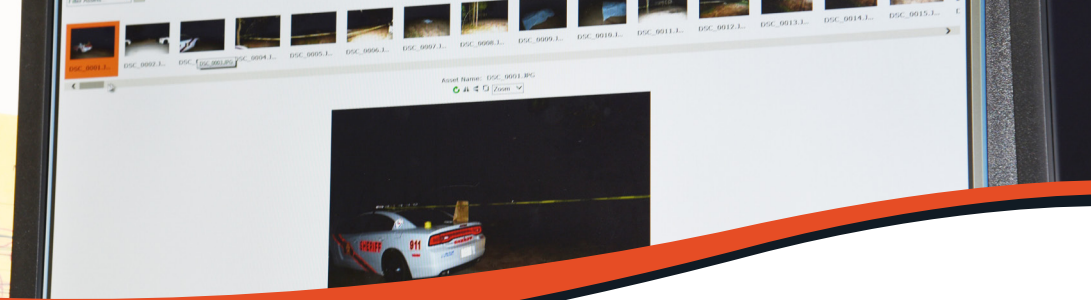
Customized Reports Are Uniform, Yield Better Documentation

Generating reports on various digital and physical assets is more streamlined than it has ever been for Montgomery County Sheriff's Office. The reports can be generated for selected assets or an entire case. For example, if a Crime Scene Investigator is processing a gun, he can enter information such as all blanks that were produced, gun make, model number, serial number, color, length of barrel, type of safety device. All of this information is the same on any other report on a processed gun.

Therefore, when a prosecutor picks up a report, it will be organized in the exact same way whether the report pertains to processed firearms and accessories, latent prints, latent evaluations, DNA processing, trace processing, vehicles processing, video, among many more categories. "All of the investigators tell me what's important to have in this form and I make up a template," Lt. Hall explained. "This gives continuity."

By using the Foray software, the agency is saving money because preparation of reports is not taking as long as it once did. Documentation is better because no key information is left out due to the ability to format reports as specific templates. "A report that comes out of here meets the highest standard that we can produce," Lt. Hall said. "It's also represents a checks and balances, especially for latent prints," he added. Each completed report is given a final administrative review.

Montgomery County Sheriff's Office's use of the ADAMS software programs has strengthened and stream-lined operations within its photo lab, latent lab, and property and evidence room. These web-based solutions have given the agency key, overarching benefits that include tighter chain of custody, security and accountability regarding all evidence being handled and stored. Evidence backlogs are easier to control because property and evidence personnel can reference the ADAMS software any time to see how much evidence is waiting to be processed. Audit trails keep track of who is downloading, viewing, processing, or printing assets. Security is higher, too, since permission levels can be set to regulate who can and cannot access assets. For its significant investment, Montgomery County is seeing efficiencies and time and cost savings it never could have realized by staying with its prior manual methods of evidence management.