

# The Perils of Interagency Property Management

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I am a property manager for a federal agency, and, like many federal agencies, ours is constantly dealing with budget cuts, reorganization, and a need to provide increased service to the public. One of the most innovative and effective ways to deal with these concerns is increased interagency cooperation by sharing positions, sharing office space, and entering into interagency agreements with other federal, state and local governments. As a result of this cooperation, we are seeing increased productivity, less down time, and a more efficient and economical use of our resources.

Signs of increased interagency cooperation are everywhere. The mere growth of professional associations like the National Property Management Association is indicative of how global our thinking is becoming and must become over the next several years in order to survive, let alone thrive.

To the property management professional, the era of interagency cooperation presents a whole new set of challenges:

- Employees who are physically located in the offices of another federal agency are essentially “guests” of the other agency, and therefore, are subject to the other agency’s policies toward security, property accountability and employee liability.
- Office collocations bring their own challenges as we seek to combine positions, including administrative support staffs, and sharing offices and equipment.
- Shared positions in many vitally important functions have increased confusion. Trust levels between agencies have increased, and the lines between the agencies have blurred, hence lowering the perception that we need to maintain accountability.
- Interagency agreements sometimes limit or eliminate the liability for loss by one of the cooperating agencies...especially agreements involving volunteer employees.
- Cultural differences between agencies, offices and bureaus are very real. What works for one office won’t work for everybody. In addition, there is a natural resistance to new ideas unless the new ideas have been approved by each agency hierarchy.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that during the course of increasing our interagency cooperation and customer service levels, the accountability of property became increasingly difficult to maintain. As we lost accountability for the property, we also found that incidents of property loss related to these situations also increased.

For example, in one incident in our agency, an employee stored a laptop personal computer under her desk because the office where she worked didn’t provide secured storage. The laptop was later stolen.

In another example, a file server was located in a shared secured room next to one from another agency. The staff of one agency decided they could provide better service by combining the two servers into one. The first server was later traded in to the manufacturer for an upgrade.

In yet another example, two employees from different agencies were sharing a project and the computer of one agency was signed over to the staff member from the other agency to use. The employee used the laptop computer on an official trip, checking it in as baggage at the airline, from which it was never recovered.

Unfortunately we discovered no easy fix for this problem. The maintenance of accountability within a cooperative environment involved more than just record keeping and inventories. It involved a total understanding of accountability and what it takes to maintain accountability. Once the potential challenges were identified, the resolution of these challenges became possible.

I have listed below several ideas which we implemented within our organization. Since this is an ongoing process, it has still not been determined whether they have been effective.

- Contact and communicate with the property management professional within the cooperating agency(ies). If property is in the custody of a staff member from the other agency, the other property manager needs to be notified immediately and provided with documents assigning custody.
- Establish and enforce strict employee clearance procedures which involve every office at every location.
- Assign an on-site, agency Custodial Property Officer to oversee the management of agency property at each location. This individual should be given the task of maintaining signature accountability and inventorying the property frequently.
- Identify all property that comes in with agency property tags immediately. Use decals as necessary to maintain accountability for property that doesn’t get assigned a property number.
- Provide supervisory training on property accountability issues.
- Remind agency employees that this is not a trust issue, it is an accountability issue.

It is always easy to see what should have been done in hindsight, but it is the astute property management professional who can foresee the challenges and rise to meet them. A property manager often has to walk the fine line between maintaining accountability for the property and furthering the goals of the agency. By approaching each new challenge with the attitude that we can find a way to do both, we are taking a great step toward achieving a balance, and making property management a respected part of the agency’s mission. ◆