

## From tools to trash: Marshall's payload stowage team tracks it

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Allison Quesenbery, left, and Keri Baugher are part of the Payload Operations Integration Center stowage team at NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Alabama. They track and monitor all items related to science experiments on the station, such as tools, power cables and trash. Credit: NASA

For many of us spring cleaning is an annual ritual and it will be here before we know it. Imagine trying to keep everything organized year-round in a five-bedroom house where everything floats. And that house

is moving 17,500 miles per hour orbiting the Earth 250 miles above us. That's exactly the job of a small team at the Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Alabama.

The Stowage Team in NASA's Payload Operations Integration Center at Marshall helps astronauts on the International Space Station stay organized. From tools to power cords and even trash, this team performs the choreography needed to track every item used for science experiments.

The team manages a [database](#) where each piece of equipment is kept and tracked by a barcode system much like in a grocery store. This database stores information such as the date, time and last person to use it.

"When an astronaut is looking for a piece of equipment and can't find it, we go to our database," said Allison Quesenbery, a member of the stowage team. "Every item is in there. Every time an item moves, we change it in the database, so we can help them locate it. The database is invaluable."

The team plans every move of every piece of payload equipment for the crew, from unpacking cargo to consolidating related items to putting things back in its place, all with the item's next use in mind, including trash disposal.

There are 12 members on the stowage team, but they can always use more help. All you need, according to them, is attention to detail.



A lost and found bag of items on the International Space Station. The items are placed in a database tracked by the stowage team at NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Alabama. The team uses a barcode system to find and put items back where they belong. Credit: NASA

There's even a trash expert.

"Trashing is the hardest thing," said Keri Baugher of the stowage team. "You'd be surprised at all the paperwork that goes into throwing something away. We not only have to track when new things arrive, we also have to track when and where they are disposed of."

When it comes to misplacing things, astronauts are no different, except that it's even easier to lose things because they can put something down for one minute while performing an experiment and turn around and find it has moved.

"We don't fault them for misplacing things," said Quesenbery. "They have a lot going on up there, so we are here on the ground to help. With so many items and so many stowage locations, it's nearly impossible for them to keep track of things all the time."

Quesenbery and Baugher agree the job is at times stressful, but it's also a fun challenge, a bit like a scavenger hunt.

"Sometimes we'll be watching live video from the station and just see something float by the camera. We then have to quickly get word to them that the item they've been searching for or we've been trying to locate just passed by," said Baugher.

Some things can take days or weeks to find. There's even a "lost in space" database, and the occasional "Wanted" poster, asking the crew to keep an eye out for important items that have floated away.

Because, while we know the item hasn't left the confines of the orbiting laboratory, it's impossible to pop down to the hardware store to pick up a replacement.

Provided by NASA

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