Iris scans faster, better than fingerprints

Summit eyes new I.D. system

Digital info will tie into national database of missing kids

By Ed Meyer

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The Summit County Sheriff's Office expects to have a new identification system operational next month for cases involving missing children, runaways and the ailing elderly, authorities said.
It is based on digital photographs of the composition of the iris, the colored portion of the eye, and is far more accurate and speedy than conventional fingerprint identification.

The equipment -- a digital camera connected to identification software in a laptop computer system -- was unveiled in a news conference Monday at the sheriff's training center in Green.
Sheriff Drew Alexander and Akron police Chief Michael Matulavich said both agencies will use the system in conjunction with a nationwide program called the Children's Identification and Location Database, known as the CHILD Project.

Cost of the portable equipment, which is so compact it can fit in a standard-size laptop case, is about $25,000 and will be split among the Sheriff's Office, the Akron Police Department, the Summit County Prosecutor's Office, Summit County Juvenile Court and the Children Services Board, Chief Sheriff's Deputy Larry Givens said.

Givens said participation in the identification process is voluntary; the system should be up and running at an area shopping mall within several weeks.

Similar iris identification systems already are being used at London's Heathrow Airport and Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam, Netherlands, which links many of the major cities in Europe.
Sean Mullin, president and chief executive officer of the CHILD Project, based in Plymouth, Mass., said Summit County law enforcement agencies will be the first to use such a system in Ohio.

Within seven years, Mullin said, the organization hopes to have as many as 5 million iris photos in the database of the National Missing Children Organization and Center for Missing Adults in Phoenix.
Law enforcement agencies using the system would be able to quickly access the database to obtain a positive identification of a missing child or adult, Mullin said.

If, for example, the person's iris ID photos were contained in the national database, Mullin said, law enforcement officials would be able to take new photos and obtain a positive identification within three to five seconds.

The system is so easy to operate, a child simply sits down and looks into a digital camera mounted at eye level. The camera takes a digital photo of each iris, then transfers the images into a laptop software system for copying and transmission to the national database.
To demonstrate the efficiency of the system, a 3-year-old daughter of one of the officers at the news conference followed an operator's instructions easily.

About 2,000 children are reported missing each day nationwide, Mullin said. The national database is growing weekly and currently has approximately 20,000 iris photos, he said.
Mullin said the system, now in use in 17 states, is so accurate, it captures more than 230 identification characteristics in each iris and can even differentiate between identical twins.
``When you see (a photo) blown up,'' Mullin said, ``it's like a beautiful sunflower.''

Police officials from Bath, Fairlawn, New Franklin, Norton, Richfield, Tallmadge and Twinsburg also attended the news conference.

Alexander said anyone seeking additional information about the program should call the Sheriff's Office at 330-643-2122.

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Sierra Vaughan, 3, checks out the iris scanning system for Summit County law enforcement agencies that was unveiled at a news conference Monday in Green. Her father, Robert Vaughan, is a Summit County sheriff's deputy.