

REGION

Local debut for eye-scan ID device

By Christine Wallgren, Globe Correspondent | August 11, 2005

The single click of a camera's shutter could help make the difference between a missing child, runaway, or an adult with Alzheimer's winding up in harm's way or making it safely home.

That's what the sheriff's departments in Plymouth, Franklin, Barnstable, and Dukes counties said on Tuesday as they rolled out a portable iris-scanning camera system designed to capture the more than 200 unique characteristics of a subject's iris, the outer rim of the eye, in a matter of a few seconds. Identification through this method is faster and more accurate than more traditional methods, such as fingerprinting or photographs, and could be particularly invaluable when time is important, officials said.

Plymouth County Sheriff Joseph D. McDonald Jr. said the system marks a "quantum leap" for law enforcement.

"Statistically, the iris is our most unique feature, even more than DNA," McDonald said. "This is going to be a giant step forward in our ability to identify missing children."

The system, called the Child Identification and Location Database, or CHILD, is a joint endeavor by the Nation's Missing Children's Organization and the Center for Missing Adults. The identification process is nonintrusive and lacks the messiness of fingerprinting. The subject simply sits in front of the camera and scanning unit, and follows a few verbal prompts while a standard digital photograph is taken and the iris is scanned.

The information immediately becomes part of a secure national database overseen by the Nation's Missing Children Organization and the Center for Missing Adults. Once in the database, a person can be identified, even years later, in a matter of seconds through a comparison with a second scan. The iris does not change with time, so the scan can be more valuable than a traditional photo.

McDonald said he hopes to begin using the system at the Marshfield Fair's Senior Day on Aug. 23 and Kid Day Aug. 24. Once trained, department personnel will be taking the equipment to community events, malls, boys and girls clubs, and senior centers -- anywhere fingerprinting and photo identification by law enforcement is done.

A Plymouth-based company, Child Project, spent the last two years devising the iris-recognition application, using software technology developed by Iridian Technologies and photographic technology developed by Panasonic. Child Project personnel are in charge of the setup and distribution of the iris-scanning kit, which consists of a high-quality digital camera, an iris scanner, and a laptop computer with software to process the information. The company only recently began distributing the equipment.

This week's distribution to four Southeastern Massachusetts sheriff's departments marks the first regional setup, according to Child Project's president, Sean Mullin. While only six other places in the nation have the equipment, Mullin said, his company has

received far more requests than expected. "We thought we would get about 100 requests in the first year, and we got more than 1,200," Mullin said. "Realistically, the first three to five years will be spent building the database. We hope to have the whole nation done in five years, with 3 to 7 million individuals enrolled."

The information stored in the central database will become increasingly useful as more law enforcement agencies become equipped, he said.

Children would be automatically expunged from the system at age 18, he said. Senior citizens and others enrolled because of a lack of ability to properly identify themselves could also be expunged when the information is no longer needed.

The cost of the scanning equipment, about \$25,000, is covered with grants from federal and state agencies, and donations from private organizations, Mullin said.

While identification through the iris-scanning system is more accurate and faster than fingerprint or photo identification, it is meant to supplement rather than replace those more traditional methods, according to Mullin. The scan is only useful if a second scan can be done on a live subject, he said.

The iris is fully formed by about 2 years old, but it is difficult to get children younger than 4 positioned well enough to get the necessary photographic data.

Mullin said the system will be useful in identifying lost children who are found but too young to identify themselves, children who are abducted, people who lack the mental capacity to properly identify themselves, and runaways who may supply false information.

According to the US Department of Justice, more than 2,000 children are reported missing each day nationwide, and there are currently over 47,000 active missing adult cases. Magi Bish, the mother of Molly Bish, a Warren teenager who was abducted in the summer of 2000, was on hand for Tuesday's demonstration of the iris scanning system. Bish enthusiastically endorsed the new identification tool, calling it "cutting edge technology." Anything that could speed the process of identification during a missing person's search is a valuable tool, Bish said. Molly Bish's remains were found three years after she disappeared.

"The idea is to intervene before a tragedy occurs in a child's or a senior's life," Mullin said.

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