

County adopts eye scan IDs

New technology could help find missing children

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A snapshot of an eye can identify a missing child and stop an inmate from being wrongly released. And Kane County wants to be the first in the Midwest to prove just that.

Officials unveiled Friday the county's newest tool in tracking people: iris scanning linked to a national database called the CHILD project, making Kane only the third county in the nation to sign onto the latest technological leap in protection.

"It's more accurate than DNA, voice recognition and fingerprinting," said Peter Flynn, a retired sheriff and president of the CHILD project.

The 12-second scans, which create digital photographs of the colored rings around both pupils, initially will be offered for free by the Kane County sheriff's department at fairs, festivals and schools, along with fingerprinting and photo ID cards. Eventually, officers hope to set aside a day a month to offer the scans on a drop-in basis at the Geneva headquarters.

Parents can opt out of the national database and instead get a driver's license-sized card with the iris scan information encoded on the back to bring in to police if their child disappears. Officials, though, expect most people to join the database right away.

As the database of iris scans grows, officials hope to whittle down the 3,400 people missing in Illinois by finding the true identity of runaways and children abducted by non-custodial parents or even strangers. Iris scans can be checked against the database within four seconds, and eventually police officers will carry hand-held computers the size of cameras to offer database checks from their cars.



"It's kind of science fiction come to life," said Capt. Ron Smith, who oversees the sheriffs' child protection programs. "If my daughter were still dating, I would put it outside my door."

Kane County Sheriff Ken Ramsey hopes to use the technology to not only look for children, but also to protect them from inmates who may accidentally be released from the jail.

When a new county jail is built, possibly in as few as three years, Ramsey plans to start using the technology to register inmates as they are booked into the jail.

At least two dozen correctional institutions and three county jails have used the technology to eliminate the release of prisoners at the wrong time.

In Kane County, the wrong prisoner has been released at least five times since late 2000, usually because one inmate threatens another to assume his name and identity to get released early.

By mapping the tiny rips in the iris muscle caused by growth, the technology can tell the difference between twins and or even a person's left and right eye. The eye is done growing at age 1, creating a unique pattern of rips 12 times more unique than the ridges on fingerprints, Flynn said.

The technology has been widely used in business for a while and is gaining popularity elsewhere. American Airlines uses it to ensure frequent flier miles aren't cashed in by someone other than the flier who earned them. A German hospital uses it to check who comes into maternity wards, and a New Jersey school uses it to help make certain only authorized parents pick up children.

The use of the technology to track abducted children and runaways gained steam last year when the National Sheriff's Association endorsed the idea of a national database. The database will be run by the Nation's Missing Children Organization and the National Center for Missing Adults.

Out of the 1,200 sheriff's departments, 65 percent of the nation's total, that have signed on to use the new technology, officials picked Kane County to head off the project in the Midwest because of its early interest.

U.S. House Speaker Dennis Hastert, a Plano Republican, secured the \$25,000 grant needed for the computer and camera equipment to start the program in Kane.

Kendall, Whiteside and Henry counties are attempting to get federal funding for the program in next year's Congressional budget.

The DuPage County sheriff's department also has said it would like to join the program but needs to find funding first.

Ramsey hopes to have the iris scans available for parents by mid-July, but first he needs the Kane County board chairman and the Elgin police chief to sign off on the grant funding for the program.