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County turns eye to finding missing persons

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Galveston County will be the first in Texas to employ an identification system that uses scans of a person's eyes to track missing kids and senior citizens.

The system eventually will be used to maintain a database of people who have been arrested or are missing.

Sheriff Gean Leonard unveiled the new system Thursday. The biometric scanners map the eyes of subjects, and the information is then stored in a national database.

Leonard said the devices initially would be used in conjunction with the children's finger-printing and photo identification kits his agency already provides. He said he wants to be able to have the systems available at safety fairs, church meetings, school meetings and the other public events to create a local database.

"The technology is fairly complex, but the concept is incredibly simple," Leonard said. "This spider web of information is going to provide for us an opportunity to very quickly, very simply, very easily — through technology — be able to identify those who may be missing for a variety of reasons."

The sheriff's office purchased two of the devices from Massachusetts-based Biometric Intelligence and Identification Technologies. The company, which supplies law enforcement agencies with biometric identification systems for use in jail systems, recently launched a similar program to help identify kids and seniors.

The Children's Identification and Location Database, or CHILD Project, works in conjunction with the The Nation's Missing Children Organization and the National Center for Missing Adults, to create a database that would be accessible by participating law enforcement agencies.

Sean Mullin, president of Biometric Intelligence, said the system scans a person's iris, which, like a fingerprint, is unique to the individual.

Mullin outlined a possible scenario: A Galveston County girl who had been scanned goes missing. Two years later, a law enforcement agency in Las Vegas, which also uses the system, could come across the girl and use a second eye scan to confirm her identity,

despite any changes in her appearance.

Mullin said the system is able to make positive identification even if the subject is wearing tinted contact lenses or glasses. Initially, the system was designed to help better track jail inmates to prevent premature releases or help find suspects wanted for more serious crimes from other jurisdictions.

Mullin said law enforcement agencies that use the system in their jails began asking for similar systems to help identify missing kids or senior citizens.

The key, he said, is developing the database.

"You have to have that database or it does no good, not unlike the databases that exist for fingerprints," said Mullin.

Thus far, only 68 police agencies in 25 states have the systems. That makes for a limited database in the best of circumstances, said Mullin, who noted that, in most cases, agencies have access to nearly five decades of fingerprints.

That's why Leonard said measuring the system's success wouldn't be based on "the number of people you find five years from now," but rather "if you have just found one."

Mullin said scans — except for those incarcerated — would be voluntary. Those wishing not to have their information stored in a database can opt to have the information stored on a personal ID card that can be accessed later.

Mullin said people should be assured the system is safe and won't lead to the invasion of one's privacy, but he did not detail how the database was safe from hacking or misuse by a government agency or a private company.

The county paid $35,000 for the system, which includes two portable scanners that connect to laptop computers. The cost includes the initial maintenance fee for the database creation, Mullin said.

Leonard said he hopes to fund the system through private donations. The Port of Texas City donated $5,000.

Eventually, Leonard said he'd like to see the system used in the county jail. He'd also like to have enough money to purchase one for each of the agency's patrol cars.