Sheriff hopes to tap into eye database
Snohomish County needs $25,000 to launch program

By Chris Collins
Herald Writer

EVERETT - Snohomish County officials are eyeing a high-tech tool to help identify runaway and missing children.

"It would be huge peace of mind for parents if, God help them, their children are missing," said Rich Niebusch, a sheriff's office spokesman.

If the county can get $25,000 from the federal government or local organizations, it could join a national program that registers people in an Internet-based database by taking high-resolution pictures of their irises.

The program, known as the Child Project, would allow parents to voluntarily register their children in the database. It would help officials identify them later if they were missing or ran away.

The new system would be an improvement on the fingerprinting system, which sometimes takes up to a month to positively identify a missing person because the database is so large and the fingerprint files take up so much space, said Kevin O'Reilly, a spokesman for the Child Project.

With the new technology, law enforcement officials and social service agencies can identify a person within 10 seconds, O'Reilly said.

About 1,100 sheriff's offices nationwide have adopted or are considering the program, O'Reilly said. Nine other counties in Washington state have expressed interest.

"It's an enhancement to what a lot of sheriffs are doing already, and in this case it's a high-tech tool," O'Reilly said.

The county has to find the $25,000 to cover the one-time startup costs for the program, however.

Sheriff Rick Bart is looking at possible U.S. Department of Justice grants and financial help from local organizations.

The National Missing Children Organization, an independent nonprofit group that helped start the Child Project, is pitching the program nationwide and said it will help Bart find federal and local funding.

"This group has stepped forward and said we know foundations" that can help fund the project, Bart said, adding without the organization's legwork he didn't think the county could find the money.

Bart said he's not sure when the county may get funding, but O'Reilly said he expects the Justice Department to possibly hand out money in July.

Bart said he'll "continue to look for money for the rest of the time I'm sheriff." His term ends in 2007.

A sheriff in Massachusetts first thought of the Child Project concept in late 2003 while working with an iris identification system used to keep track of prisoners. He thought about expanding the system to help identify missing or runaway children.

Those hesitant to put their children's information on a national database or who are skeptical of government have expressed concern about the program.

For example, O'Reilly said, a news station in Columbia, S.C., started a report on the Child Project with a scene from "Minority Report," a 2002 Tom Cruise movie that portrays a futuristic world in which the government uses eye scanners to keep track of people's movements and identity.

Bart and O'Reilly are convinced the Child Project will do more good than harm. "The bottom line is that more information will help us and make it easier," Bart said.

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