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Herkimer County Sheriff's Office debuts new child protection system

BY ROB JUTEAU *Evening Times Staff Writer (Sat., Nov. 12)*

HERKIMER — The Herkimer County Sheriff's Office has a new tool to identify and locate missing children and adults.

At a press conference held at his office, Sheriff Christopher Farber Wednesday demonstrated and officially launched the Children's Identification and Location Database Project, making the Herkimer County Sheriff's Office the first sheriff's office in the state of New York to install the new cutting-edge system that uses iris recognition biometric technology. The CHILD Project is a secure network and registry that enables law enforcement and social service agencies to locate and positively identify missing children and adults with iris recognition biometric technology.

"Today marks the official beginning of this important project in New York," Farber said. "It is my hope that over the coming years every sheriff in the nation will have one of these systems at their disposal to help identify, locate and reunite missing individuals with their families."

Through the network, the CHILD Project compares the unique features contained in the iris against a database of individuals who voluntarily enroll throughout the country to determine identity. Participation is entirely voluntary, just as it is now with fingerprint and photo ID programs.

Iris recognition biometric technology, the quickest and most accurate form of identification technology available, positively determines the identity of an individual by capturing a high-resolution digital photograph of an individual's iris. The technology can tell the difference between twins or an individual's right and left eye. The technology is non-intrusive and an image of the iris is captured by simply looking into the camera.

Registration takes a matter of minutes as the high-speed, high-resolution digital camera takes a photograph of a person's eye, and stores it in a database with corresponding information about the person, including their name, address and who their parent or guardian is.

For a person to be identified, they must stare into a lens that reads their iris and searches the database for a match. The search takes seconds.

"This project and this system is unique in that no one else in the county is doing this," Farber said. "We will not step on another agency's toes that may be fingerprinting, using the Child ID photo program or taking DNA samples to identify children or adults. All of those measures should also be taken, as this is something that should be used to compliment all other protective measures. The more information on file the better."

"There's no Social Security number in there, and this isn't used to do any kind of background check on anybody," Sean Mullin, president of the CHILD Project, said. "This is simply to identify who you are, not tie you to a crime. And once you have the person you want to identify,

you will know immediately who it is. Iris recognition technology enhances the identification methods already in place by providing a quick and easy method of correctly identifying an individual. There are no false identifications. Physical appearance changes, however, from birth the iris never changes.”

In the first six months after birth, the iris stretches and leaves marks. After that, the iris never changes and the marks make each iris unique.

“It’s more accurate than DNA, voice recognition and fingerprinting,” Peter Flynn, president of the Massachusetts Sheriff’s Association, said.

The system is portable and may be used at schools and community events, in addition to the sheriff’s department. Parents and adults 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 to police.

“That is one of the most important aspects of the CHILD Project system,” Sergeant Tom Adams of the Herkimer County Sheriff’s Office said. “There are people out there who are worried about ‘Big Brother’ having too much information on their children. This system allows you to keep your information out of the database and bring it to us when a child or adult disappears. It allows you to keep your personal information private.”

The CHILD Project database is hosted by the Nation’s Missing Children Organization and National Center for Missing Adults, a nonprofit agency that provides nationwide assistance to law enforcement and families of missing persons. “This unique and innovative program will fill an important gap in our nation’s ability to quickly, and positively identify missing children and adults,” Kym Pasqualini, president and CEO of NMCO, said.

“I appreciate the efforts of Sheriff Farber and everyone involved in bringing this system to Herkimer County. God willing we will never have to use it, but I am glad that we have the system at our disposal and that we are able to provide this service to the community,” Herkimer County Legislature Chairman Leonard Hendrix said. Hendrix added that with a large elderly population in Herkimer County the system is vital.

“According to the U.S. Department of Justice, more than 2,000 children are reported missing each day and there are currently over 47,000 active missing adult cases,” Mullin said. “We are pleased to provide a technology that can help reunite missing children with their families.”

With the official launch, the Plymouth, Mass.-based CHILD Project team will continue to identify other sheriffs’ offices that want to participate in the program and will work with them to secure funding for the system from state and federal agencies and private foundations.