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Reading Eagle: Ryan McFadden

Hannah M. Rodriguez, 10, sits still while her eyes are photographed for a national registry by Kevin R. O'Reilly of the CHILD Project.

The eyes have it

Iris-recognition technology used by a missing-persons agency is brought to Berks County

By Holly Herman

Reading Eagle

Ten-year-old Hannah M. Rodriguez's eyes lit up Wednesday when she became the first child in Pennsylvania to be photographed for a nationwide registry that can be used to identify missing children by matching their eyes through digital photographs.

"This is so cool," Hannah, a fifth-grader at Cornwall Terrace Elementary School, said after being photographed for the database.

Berks County Sheriff Barry J. Jozwiak is the first sheriff in Pennsylvania to participate in the effort known as the CHILD Project, based in Plymouth, Mass.

CHILD stands for Children's Identification and Location Database, according to organization's Internet site, www.thechildproject.org.

A digital photograph of the iris is sent to a national database via the Internet, officials said.

The database is a partnership among The CHILD Project, The Nation's Missing Children Organization and National Center for Missing Adults.

"It was so easy to do," said Hannah, a daughter of William Jr. and Tammy M. Rodriguez, a real estate administrator in Jozwiak's office.

"After age 1, no two irises are alike," Jozwiak said. "This is very unique. We can match the irises up instantly. This is a big step toward helping the children. We have to protect our children."

If a parent reports their child missing, the sheriff's office will send the photograph to state police, who put the photograph into a another national database of missing children.

The CHILD Project is being set up in 17,000 county sheriffs' offices in 46 states, and so far, databases are operating in 15 states, said Kevin R. O'Reilly, CHILD Project vice president.

Jozwiak's office received a \$25,000 grant from the Department of Justice to buy the camera, computer, software and other items for the system.

Jozwiak said the CHILD Project enhances a program called ID Me that his office began two years ago. That program involves taking photographs and fingerprints of children. He said 5,000 children are in that database.

ID Me is not compatible with the CHILD Project because those photos do not focus on the eyes, Jozwiak said.

Fortunately, he said, there has been no need to use any system to identify missing children in Berks.

O'Reilly, who photographed Hannah, said the left and right eyes are different.

He said there are 135 unique identification qualities in the eyes.

"If she (Hannah) wanders away and we don't know where she is, we can track her down through her eyes," O'Reilly said. "It's a high-technology enhancement and a quick way to get children back to their loved ones."

He said contact lenses do not affect the photograph.

Jozwiak said the system will be a help to parents of missing children.

"There are plans in place (to deal with) bomb scares and terrorists," Jozwiak said. "Now we have a plan for the (the missing) child."