St. Johns County debuts new child ID technology
Iris scans to help ID missing adults, too

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In the past, the tools used to find missing people, especially children and the aged, included finger prints, dental records and identification cards.

Now there's a better way, according to the St. Johns County Sheriff's Office. The new technology -- through iris recognition biometric technology -- also can help prevent an inmate from being wrongly released, according to the Sheriff's Office. The program known as the Children's Identification and Location Database (CHILD) Project was officially adopted Thursday as part of the St. Johns County Sheriff's Office's missing persons program.

The process is simple and takes only a blink of the eye to add a person to a secure network and registry that covers the United States. To register an iris, a person stands 3 to 10 inches from the camera and looks into it for a few seconds. There are no lasers, strong lights or beams. The image of the iris and the information on the child is stored in a database in Phoenix.

Sheriff David Shoar hailed the new technology as a godsend for his department and the community.

"Our population is growing significantly and the biggest growth is in two categories: juveniles and seniors, two of the most vulnerable groups found anywhere," he said.
"I see it as wonderful tool to help us find missing persons of all ages. In the last five years the number of the people suffering from Alzheimer's has increased locally, and this is another way we help find people that have walked away and can't identify themselves."
"I see this as a win-win situation for us. It didn't cost the taxpayers a penny. We paid the cost for the equipment -- $25,000 -- from drug money we confiscated."

Sean Mullin, president of the CHILD Project, said he first notified law enforcement agencies about the availability of the technology last January and began discussing the project with Florida Sheriff's Association in April in Destin.

St. Johns County is the third Florida law enforcement agency to add the technology, and the 14th in the country.

"Bringing this part of the state into the database is considered key," Mullin said. "The (I-)95 corridor and surrounding demographics make St. Augustine important to the whole project. I'm glad they moved up the time frame for becoming part of the project."
Shoar said two of his staff members, Noreen Diaz and Anna Marie Willis, have been training on the equipment and will be present for upcoming public events like fairs and such offering the technology for St. Johns students and seniors.

"We're going to put this wonderful technology to good use," he said. Mullin said the equipment includes an iris recognition camera, software, computer and other electronic equipment such as adapters and cables.

He said while the main purpose of the technology is the recovery of missing children -- more than 2,000 are reported missing every day by The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children

across the nation -- its use isn't limited to that sector. "The Charlotte/Douglas International Airport in North Carolina has used the technology since 2000 for frequent passengers, and banks are considering looking at its use for automated teller machines."

Mullin said the technology can't do everything -- yet. He said it doesn't help law enforcement find missing children faster, but once a child is located, it does help law enforcement identify a child in a few seconds. There is another drawback to the technology, Mullin said. "It doesn't work on dead people, because one of the first thing that happens when a person dies is rigor mortis sets in and fluid in the eye dries up, therefore rendering the technology useless," he said. "That's where the other forms of identification usually come back into play."

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ST. JOHNS COUNTY Sheriff's Office records specialist Anna Marie Willis uses a new computer system designed to identify missing children to photograph the iris of 15-year-old William Mullin's eye during a demonstration Thursday. The computer scans the iris and enters the information into a database that can later be used to identify the subject nationwide. By PETER WILLOTT, peter.willott@staugustinerecord.com

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SHERIFF'S OFFICE records specialist Anna Marie Willis uses the new computer system to photograph the iris of 15-year-old William Mullin's eye Thursday. Photos by PETER WILLOTT, peter.willott@staugustinerecord.com

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WILLIAM MULLIN holds still so a camera can photograph the iris of his eye Thursday during a demonstration, at the St. Johns County Sheriff's Office.

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