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An eye on children's safety

Hillsborough County becomes the first in the southeastern United States to use iris recognition program.

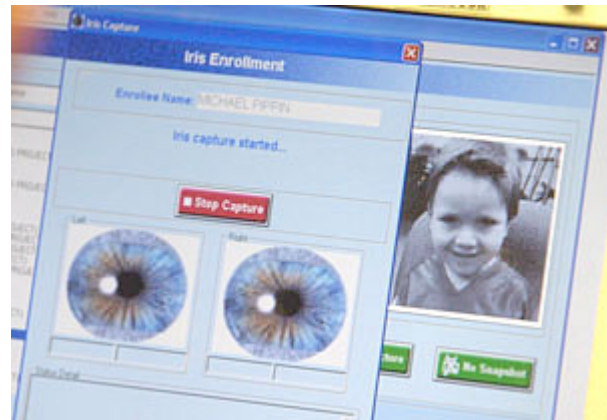
By SHERRI DAY

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TAMPA - Calm came to Sherry Pippin in the blink of an eye. As her 5-year-old son, Michael, stretched his blue eyes wide, a tiny camera took his picture Tuesday and scanned his iris. Nearby, a technician put the images and Michael's demographic information into a national database designed to help law enforcement officials quickly locate missing persons.

The act comforted Pippin, who has become increasingly concerned about her children's well-being after the child abductions and killings of Sarah Lunde, Jessica Lunsford and Carlie Brucia.

"It'll be a sure thing that they'll be able to locate more children this way," said Pippin, 26, who lives in Seffner. "He's going to be starting school, and someone could come up to him. If that ever happened, we could track him by his eyes or his fingerprints."



[Times photos: Thomas Goethe]

A computer screen shows a scan of Michael Pippin's eyes Tuesday in Tampa. The scan will be added to the Child Identification and Location Database Project, which helps identify missing persons.



After scanning a child's eyes, parents can keep the information in CHILD or get it on an identification card.

Michael helped launch the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office's iris recognition program Tuesday afternoon.

The computer program is part of the Child Identification and Location Database, or CHILD Project, a collaboration between the Nation's Missing Children Organization and the Center for Missing Adults.

The two groups began partnering with sheriff's agencies around the country in May to scan the eyes of at-risk children and adults.

Hillsborough County is the first law enforcement agency in the southeastern United States to install the system, CHILD Project officials said. The county follows Phoenix, Ariz.; Kane County, Ill.; Hampshire, Mass.; and Richland, S.C. The new system obviously doesn't prevent abductions, but sheriff's officials say it could be a big help in identifying children found after being taken by a stranger or a noncustodial parent, or who have run away.

The system also can be used to help identify vulnerable adults, such as an Alzheimer's patient who might wander away from home.

If a missing child is found, officials could scan their iris and match it with the information in the national database for immediate, positive identification. The system can't be used to identify a body.

Sean G. Mullin, the CHILD Project's president and chief executive, said the group selected Hillsborough County in 2004 for its initial launch because the agency impressed him with its community programs.

Each portable iris scanning system includes a laptop, high-speed cameras and specialized software. The computer systems cost \$25,000 each. To enroll in the program, participants must be at least 1-year-old, the age when the iris is believed to have fully developed.

After the photographs are taken, parents put their child's demographic information into a national database, which is stored at the Nation's Missing Children's headquarters in Phoenix.

All participants receive an identification card with their picture and demographic information. Persons who decide not to be listed in the database will be issued

an ID card with a bar code that holds their personal information. To use the system, the sheriff's office would need to scan the card. CHILD officials said the database is purged once a child turns 18.

Hillsborough County purchased two machines with local law enforcement grants, sheriff's officials said. Iris scanning is free to the public and will be made available at community events and neighborhood meetings, said Col. Greg Brown, who has helped implement the program. Would-be participants can also sign up at the sheriff's Crime Prevention Bureau.

"Just like fingerprinting for children at community events, we'll do this," Brown said. "The more tools we have, the more effectively we can do our job."

Brown said his department plans to begin wide use of the program on Aug. 1. Within five years, CHILD Project officials hope to have 3,000 computer systems in sheriff's offices nationwide with 3-million to 5-million participants.

"It's not the silver bullet," Mullin said. "It won't solve all these horrible crimes, but what it will do is give law enforcement and social services a great new tool. It'll give law enforcement a chance to intervene before tragedy occurs."

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