

Eyes have new role in finding people

Sheriff's offices may use iris images to determine IDs

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Images of the iris are a new focus for local agencies seeking missing children and adults.

Six Northeast Ohio sheriff's offices are among 24 in the state and 1,100 nationwide that have agreed to participate in the Children's Identification and Location Database (CHILD) Project, which will use iris recognition technology.

The program was announced Thursday in Phoenix, the headquarters of the Nation's Missing Children Organization.

All each office needs is \$25,000 to buy an iris recognition camera, software, computer and other equipment to join the program.

Capt. Steve Finical, assistant Summit County sheriff, is not worried about raising the money. "We are looking for grant money and there are a lot of folks out there that think this is a worthy cause," he said.

Sheriffs were asked a year ago to join the program and were notified Wednesday that it was under way. Cuyahoga, Erie, Geauga, Medina and Trumbull counties have indicated their support.

Every iris, the colored part of the eye, is unique, said Kevin O'Reilly, director of communications for The Point Group, a technology consulting firm in Massachusetts that created the software for the program.

After age 1, the characteristics of a person's iris never change, he said.

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 information on the child or adult will be stored in a database in Phoenix.

Digital images of an iris can be immediately compared, O'Reilly said. Comparing fingerprints, used for child identification for about 20 years, can take hours to days depending on whether the child is known and whether the fingerprint is matched to a statewide or nationwide database, he said.

In recent years, iris recognition technology has been used in more than two dozen correctional facilities in the United States, according to The Point Group. The Charlotte/Douglas International Airport in North Carolina has used the technology since 2000 for frequent passengers. Financial institutions are studying it for automated teller machines.

Massachusetts Sheriff Robert Garvey, who uses iris recognition in his jail, thought it could be used to locate missing children. He gained approval from the National Sheriff's Association in 2004.

Finical said it's a great tool. Its primary use would be to register the irises of children, but Finical said his department could include adults with dementia should they ever be reported missing. And it may be used in the Summit County Jail.

"It is very easy to use," he said.

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