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TIM DOMINICK/THE STATE

Sean Mullin, president of the CHILD Project, lines up a camera Wednesday to take a digital photo of Jacob Steinhilper's eye to demonstrate the iris recognition system used to identify missing children.

Beyond fingerprints

In the blink of an eye, system can ID children

By ADAM BEAM

Staff writer

It looks like a Viewmaster, and Richland County officials hope it will help track down missing children.

The Richland County Sheriff's Department is the first in the Southeast — and one of three sheriff's offices nationwide — to join the CHILD Project, a database that relies on irises instead of fingerprints to locate missing children.

Children stand about a foot away from a camera that takes a digital picture of the child's iris, the colored part of the eye surrounding the pupil.

That image is stored in a nationwide database, so if a missing child shows up in another county that has access to the database, officials can identify the child.

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

Parents receive a card about the size of a driver's license that includes a picture of the child and the iris scan. It's free, and parents can choose whether they want to release their child's information into the national database or keep it for their own use.

Richland County will get the equipment about July 4.

Richland County's equipment was donated from the Children's Identification and Location Database Project, which is maintained by the Nation's Missing Children Organization, a nonprofit agency.

Sean Mullin, president of the CHILD project, said he notified law enforcement agencies about the project a year ago. He said Richland County Sheriff Leon Lott was one of the first to respond and that Lott's enthusiasm led his group to donate the \$25,000 system.

Kevin O'Reily, communications director for The CHILD Project, said the FBI has about 150,000 missing child cases that are unresolved.

"It will probably take two or three years before we start to have a significant impact because it will take that long to get that many systems out there," O'Reily said.

Officials urged parents to still use other safeguards, such as Kid Print, which gives children identification cards with their pictures and contact information.

It takes about 15 seconds for a child's iris to be photographed, and about nine seconds to search the database for a match. Lott said fingerprinting can take weeks.

Mullin demonstrated the system Wednesday. Acting as one of the guinea pigs was 10-year-old Ashley Carrigg, a rising sixth-grader at Heathwood Hall. Carrigg described the machine as "just a mirror of your eyes."

While Richland County, Phoenix, Ariz., and Northhampton, Mass., are the only sheriff's offices using the database, Mullin said 1,200 other offices have requested it, including 26 in South Carolina.

The Lexington County Sheriff's office sent a grant proposal for the equipment a year ago, but hasn't heard back, said the department's spokesman John Allard.

Mullin said his goal is to have the entire country online in three to five years.

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