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Use of digital fingerprints is expanding

Checks required for many jobs

BY **BOB CULLINANE** • STAFF WRITER • MAY 5, 2008

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More than a million New Jersey job applicants — teachers, nurses, real estate brokers and more — have undergone electronic fingerprinting in the past five years, as the state continues to expand an ID program designed to detect potentially ineligible or criminal applicants.

In the Department of Education alone, the prints and background checks have found that 1,700 applicants for school positions, or current employees, possessed disqualifying arrest records in 2007.

"We're doing about 70,000 (background) checks a year, and the number of "hits" is going up each month," said Carl Carabelli, manager of the education department's criminal history review unit.

These hits include both new applicants with disqualifying offenses — such as drug offenses, robbery and aggravated assault — and those who are charged with such offenses after being hired.

And these numbers do not include school employees — teachers, school bus drivers, janitors and aides



A fingerprint technician at Sagem-Morpho in Toms River takes prints to be entered into the digital system. (STAFF PHOTO: BOB BIELK)

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— who were hired before February 2003, when a digital, electronic fingerprinting system was initiated, because the law only covers new school hires.

But that may change. A bill introduced last month by state Sen. Shirley K. Turner, D-Mercer, would require all current school employees and contractors, no matter how long they have been employed, to submit to electronic fingerprinting and undergo a background check. The state Attorney General's Office estimates there are 200,000 such school employees.

"I've heard through many sources that a lot of people who have committed crimes are falling through the cracks," Turner said. "We've got to protect our children, and (background checks) are the only way to do that."

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In April 2007, the Asbury Park Press discovered three active New Jersey teachers with disqualifying criminal records after matching criminal records with school employees. The three were later fired.

wide application

Over the past five years, the use of electronic fingerprinting by state agencies for nonpolice purposes has jumped 83 percent — from 184,000 prints in 2003 to 337,000 in 2007 — according to figures supplied by the state Attorney General's Office.

At least eight state divisions or agencies require new applicants for licenses or certifications to submit to fingerprinting, according to Mark Perkiss, spokesman for the Department of the Treasury.

Among those applicants who must undergo fingerprinting are school board employees and contractors; health-care professionals; real estate brokers, salespeople and appraisers; pawnbrokers; check-cashers; limousine drivers; mortgage brokers and others.

The centerpiece of the state's background check program is the electronic fingerprinting system known as Live Scan.

Under a contract with the French biometric technology firm Sagem-Morpho, Live Scan fingerprinting services are provided at 15 locations throughout the state, including two in Ocean County and one in Monmouth County.

Applicants pay \$70.25 each for the fingerprinting and background check. For teachers who switch districts, a new background check must be performed. For most others who undergo a check when applying for a professional license, no new background check is needed when switching employers.

According to Deputy Attorney General Dave Rebeck, most of that fee — \$49.25 — is paid to the FBI and New Jersey State Police to run background checks after they receive a fingerprint set.

Another \$11 per print goes to Sagem-Morpho, which provides the fingerprint sites, equipment and office personnel.

The final \$10 is what's known as a "flagging" fee. This allows state law enforcement authorities to cross-check the noncriminal electronic fingerprint database with daily arrest reports from around the state.

When a match occurs, the name of the suspect is flagged and forwarded to the appropriate state agency or division. It is up to the agency to determine if the charges require disciplinary action against that licensee or employee.

"We receive these notices daily over a secure printer," the education department's Carabelli said, adding that the affected school district is notified within one day.

It's important to remember that the flags represent a charge of a disqualifying offense, not conviction, Carabelli said, and that the DOE follows the case to its conclusion to ensure compliance.

uses may expand

Nicholas DeLuca, a retired State Police captain who now works as program manager with the AG's office, said that the electronic fingerprint and background check system continues to improve.

"It was our initial goal to get (background check results) back to the state agency within 10 days of the print being taken," DeLuca said of the program's start in 2003. "We are now averaging about two days. With the old ink-and-roll (fingerprinting system), it would take months."

DeLuca said that the traditional ink method also produced an error rate of 30 to 40 percent; the digital print error rate is about 1 percent.

Rebeck, the deputy attorney general, said the success of the electronic fingerprint program could bring even wider use of the procedure.

"The Legislature does not see the fingerprint process as an impediment, so we may see additional legislation" requiring fingerprinting, he said. "We're doing more criminal background checks now than ever before."

DeLuca said that the practice has become so common, that the number of fingerprints taken for noncriminal purposes, such as licensing and employment, is double the number taken for criminal checks.

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kitkatlb wrote:

Sorry, just tired and my mistype was mistyped. LOL But, I think you get the drift.