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Electronics replace ink and paper in fingerprint process

03/10/2010 by Joe Wilhelm Jr. Staff Writer

Law enforcement agencies throughout Florida will have more help to track down criminals.

The Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) has spent \$7.4 million on Project Falcon to speed up the process of collecting finger and palm prints, increase the storage space for those items and boost electronic search capabilities.

Dominick Pape, Special Agent in Charge of the department's Jacksonville Regional Operations Center, introduced the equipment Tuesday that will assist the FDLE in identifying criminals.

"On average, on a daily basis, about 3,000 people are arrested in Florida," said Pape. "To address that, through new technology, we are now able to add more photos of arrest fingerprints and palm prints to our system. We never had the ability prior. It was a storage issue and a technology issue."

The Falcon Biometrics System was created to address that issue. The FBI currently operates the Integrated Automated Fingerprint Identification System, which is a national database for fingerprints and images used by law enforcement agencies. The Falcon Biometrics System is similar, but its entries are from cases that occurred in Florida and it contains mug shots, fingerprints, palm prints and images of tattoos and scars.

The information can be accessed from a statewide network from booking facilities, courtrooms, patrol cars and jails.

The system has been functional for about six months and Sheriff John Rutherford was glad to have access to the larger database after a newborn baby was recently kidnapped from a local hospital.

"The case with Jasmine White was a perfect example of how important those systems are," said Jacksonville Sheriff John Rutherford, whose office was able to find the baby after lifting a single fingerprint from a document that White reportedly gave to the baby's parents.

"The new scanners also help speed up the booking process, and makes sure we have a good set of prints. Before, with the ink pad and paper, there could be smudges and the process would have to be started over again. The scanners eliminate those problems," he said.

Pape also said time and money will be saved by the new system.

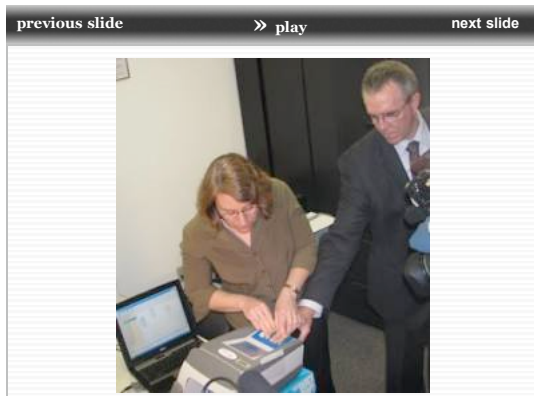
"Prior to the electronic system, we would get the fingerprint card and send it to Tallahassee. Then, someone there would inspect the card to see if it was usable," said Pape. "After it was verified, then it would go into the system. A time-consuming process. Now, you enter the image into the system and hit 'send' and it's available statewide. The system won't allow someone to submit a bad set of prints. They have to meet standards that are set up in the program or they will not be accepted."

Falcon will also be used to help law enforcement agencies with cold cases.

"Currently, there are 129,000 fingerprints and 12,470 palm prints linked to unsolved crimes in the system," said Pape. "With the help of Falcon, we can do a reverse search after someone is booked in to see if they were involved in any other cases throughout the state."

While the program is bringing changes to the field of forensics in the state, some practices will remain the same. Law enforcement agencies will still have to collect fingerprints and palm prints from crime scenes and enter them into the system, which is no easy task, according to Shawn Arnold, a Florida Bar Board Certified Criminal Law attorney.

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Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) Regional Information Technology Manager Susan Bortzfield records the fingerprints of FDLE Chief of Forensics Jim Gettemy during the introduction of FDLE's new fingerprint system.

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The time change is this weekend. Do you prefer Eastern Standard Time or Daylight Savings Time?
The results through in-person and Internet voting:
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"From a practical standpoint, it's still difficult to get 'prints of value,' a term police use for a good set of prints," said Arnold. "You can process a place where someone lives and get no 'prints of value.' But the technology does change the landscape in that having a computer analyze the prints and a person verify them makes them more valid. It makes it more daunting from a defense standpoint."

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