



Fingerprinting Goes High Tech in Bay County

By: David Angier of The News Herald

Digital technology might help law enforcement officers solve crimes and speed up their jobs but it probably won't take away those eight little words so associated with a traffic stop – May I see your license and registration, please.

“That will be the day,” said Sheriff's Department Capt. Jerry Girvin. “As we all know, what you put into a computer is not always going to be 100 percent accurate. So an officer's first words will continue to be, ‘Good evening, may I see your license and registration?’ Regardless of what he'll have back on his computer screen in his car.”

Within the next two years, officers in Bay County will have quite a bit on their screens. Communication upgrades will enable sheriff's deputies and the Panama City Police Department to instantly access information on a car's registered owner, license plate, insurance status and vehicle identification number. Plus, officers will know if the registered owner – presumably the driver – has a criminal history or outstanding warrants.

“All the things to keep an officer safe,” Girvin said.

Technology is also speeding up the investigative process. Fingerprint analysis, a process that once took weeks or months, now takes hours.

Bay County has the system in place to expedite the process over some other counties in the state. Those booked into the Bay County Jail have their fingerprints scanned electronically and those samples are sent to crime labs without a finger ever touching ink.

Girvin said that allows for better samples and faster analysis.

Two years ago, Florida upgraded an already good fingerprint system by digitally recording and storing fingerprints. Now when a sample is sub-

mitted to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, it is matched against every stored sample in the system in 10 minutes. The whole process of fingerprinting a suspect, sending those prints to FDLE, matching them and returning the results takes about two hours, said Charles Schaeffer.

Schaeffer is a systems programming administrator and manages the mainframes and servers for FDLE. He said because of this system Florida will help the FBI this year test its new digital latent print system.

The FBI on July 28 went to a digital system that allows investigators to match prints from a suspect with those already in the national system. The FBI has always provided this service but before upgrading its system the process took days or weeks to complete.

Now, like the Florida system, it takes hours.

Schaeffer said samples from Florida were sent electronically to the FBI technicians. Those technicians were handling 50,000 new samples a day.

Now the whole process is handled through the computer.

Handling latent prints – fingerprints taken off objects at the scene of a crime – is a little more time consuming, Schaeffer said. Florida's own system is capable of sending 400 new samples through each day to compare to millions of stored samples for a possible match.

But the results usually aren't conclusive, he said. When the FBI compares latent prints – many of which are incomplete fingerprints – it sends back a list of possible hits.

Florida was chosen to participate in the FBI's data test because of its nationally recognized crime labs.

“Florida is one of the leaders in the United States as far as doing fingerprint processing,” Schaeffer said.

“Our crime labs are known for their expertise.”

Fingerprints aren't the only area where innovations are being made. New York's attorney general recently proposed that guns be test fired before distribution to stores. Bullet and shell samples from new guns could be shipped to the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms to be analyzed and stored digitally, according to *The New York Times*.

The ATF could test bullets and casings found at crime scenes and compare those to already tested guns. They could determine exactly what gun was used. The serial number for that gun could be traced and officers could then determine where it was sold.

Ballistics test on bullets found at crime scenes are already stored digitally.

Mugshots are even being processed digitally in California. The Sacramento County Sheriff's Department and Sacramento police came up with the Automated Mug Shot Program which will offer high-resolution pictures over laptop computers using digital technology.

Girvin said all the new technology is valuable but nothing will replace officers working in the streets to solve crimes.

“No matter how you slice it and dice it and cut it, regardless of how high tech you get the best that technology can do is increase the speed of information you get,” he said. “You can't enforce the law in the computer.” ■

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