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# Fingerprint unit fits right in at Pinellas County jail

By Keith Niebuhr, Times Staff Writer  
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Fingerprint technician Alan Beards cross-references fingerprints Tuesday at the Pinellas County Jail in Clearwater.



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Clearwater police Officer Douglass Bailey was sent out late one recent night to check on a suspicious person seen wandering through downtown Clearwater.

Not far from the police station, he found a heavily intoxicated man who fit the description. When Bailey checked Ruben Rosario's records, he discovered the Clearwater resident was wanted for failing to appear in court on an old open container charge. Rosario was arrested and booked at the Pinellas County Jail.

Seventeen hours later, he was back on the streets. But his fingerprints remained at the jail.

During a subsequent computer search, a fingerprint technician made an intriguing discovery: The man's prints matched those collected by authorities at a handful of recent local burglaries.

Using that match, Clearwater police arrested the man again six days later. Today, Rosario is back in jail with a \$12,500 bail, facing four felony burglary charges.

"That was a crime wave stop," said Bill Schade, who heads the county's fingerprint records department.

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At the jail, technicians play an important role.

They take prints, fingers and palm, of everyone booked, from the minor offender to the repeat offender. With prints in hand, they check them against local and state prints using the Automated Fingerprint Identification System, which cost the Sheriff's Office about \$1.5 million to install four years ago.



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"Within 30 minutes of your hands being on the machine, we know who you are," Schade said.

As part of their routine, technicians also pore through old case evidence compiled by the department's forensics team to look for matches. About 100 times a month, they get a hit, as they did with Rosario.

"Whether it leads to an arrest or not, it's a lead for detectives," Schade said. "A lot of times, a detective has to move on. But we don't. We never give up."

The technicians' workload is heavy; in 2008, 59,646 bookings were processed at the jail. Three of them are at the site around the clock, seven days a week.

"We're one of the few agencies doing this 24/7 at the local level," Schade said.

The technicians haven't always been stationed at the jail. Before March 2008, they worked across the street while deputies handled booking print duties.

Because of budget cuts, Sheriff Jim Coats thought it would better serve the department to give those deputies other duties and move 12 members of the 25-person fingerprint section to the jail. But the shift wasn't without some apprehension.

After all, being in direct contact with inmates was a new experience for the technicians.

Once assured their security was a priority, the fingerprinters were placed in a small office at the jail. Fifty-four weeks later, they are fixtures.

According to Schade, technicians better understand jail procedures and the booking process today, the identification process is faster than before, booking errors have declined and his fingerprinters are now considered part of the jail's team.

"This was one of the best decisions we could have made," Coats said. "The technology, along with the experience of the staff, has greatly increased law enforcement's ability to solve crimes."

Technicians are civilians, not deputies, but their work attire — baggy black pants, big boots and gray polo shirts with the sheriff's logo on the crest — suggests otherwise.

"We dress the part," said technician William Gerretz, 35, of St. Petersburg. "We've got to have some level of respect."

The technicians have added a human touch to the otherwise uncomfortable fingerprinting procedure. It is not their job to judge, they say.

"Being fingerprinted is not a pleasant thing done to you, but I think I have a way where I can put them at ease," said technician Alan Beards, 58, of New Port Richey. "I try to treat them with dignity and respect."

Doing so helps the process, they say. The calmer a person is, the better his or her prints are likely to be. And for the fingerprinters, that is vital.

"We," Beards said, "are not allowed to make a mistake."

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