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The scanner, above, on the right, reads and transmits index fingerprints to the PDA cellular phone, at left. The phone then sends the image out to be identified by the California Drivers License database, and by a federal criminal database, called JDIS. At right, TSB Deputy Antonio Quintanilla scans the index finger of a willing volunteer outside the Red Line at Gateway Plaza. The wireless device can capture and transmit fingerprints to be verified against state and federal databases. The system will identify the subject and provide a two-year criminal history, if any, within three minutes.

Photos by Jimmy Stroup

Sheriff's TSB Uses Technology, Database to Identify Those Without ID

By JIMMY STROUP

(July 18, 2007) Normally when you think of cop gear, you're thinking of a badge, a gun, maybe a nightstick, handcuffs. But as technology gets better, so does the armory of the law enforcement officer.

That's why the Metro Transit Services Bureau has turned to wireless fingerprint scanners and cellular telephone database access as part of their arsenal to fight crime on the rail system and transit centers.

Called "Hand Held Live Scan Devices," TSB's newest gadget allows deputies to take fingerprints of people in the field who they think aren't revealing their true identities.

Once the deputies detain someone for an offense, or just see someone who looks not quite right, they can use the scanner to verify identity through the California Drivers License database system. They can also check the criminal history of a person against the JDIC system, which is the Justice Department's criminal database system.

"This will help us catch people who are wanted, have a warrant out for them, violating parole, and so on," said TSB's Lt. John Baylis. "We'll be tied into Justice, so any kind of criminal background will be available to the deputies on the scene."

Provides a criminal history

The device scans the index fingers, and transmits that information wirelessly to a PDA cellular phone, which then sends the information to be verified by the databases. In less than three minutes, the deputy can scan the person in question and have their identity and criminal history over the last two years pop up on their phone.

And though the scanners will help catch the occasional "wanted man," so to speak, the devices will also help the TSB perform some of its more routine functions.

"It will help us a lot on the buses and trains with people who haven't purchased a ticket. We issue them a citation, but they might not have any ID on them," said Baylis. "We can use this device to see if they are who they say they are."

It's common for citations written by TSB to be thrown out by the court because, without an ID of some kind, it's difficult for the deputies to prove that the offender was the one who failed to pay the fare. Those caught without a fare will commonly use a false name and birth date, claiming they don't have an ID card or drivers license.

"This will increase the remuneration coming to Metro on all those deleted citations because now we'll be able to verify through fingerprints who people are," Baylis said.

Good things to report

Deputy Antonio Quintanilla has been using the scanner at the El Monte station for about a year, and has only good things to report about its usefulness in the field.

"I'm not scanning everybody I see," he said, estimating he uses it maybe 10 times in a shift. "But I do scan people who say they have no ID or people who I can tell are lying to me."

Quintanilla said the device doesn't store fingerprints, so there aren't any privacy concerns, and that the memory of who's been scanned is deleted after a couple of weeks. He said the department is currently coming up with a set of instructions to streamline the process.

"People are intimidated by the device, so they'll 'fess up to any questioning once I pull this out and ask for their fingerprints," he said. "They all say, 'Oh, well alright. I'm so-and-so. You don't need to fingerprint me.' Of course, then they've lied to me, so I run their prints anyway."

Baylis said the TSB has one working live scan unit at the moment, which is the test unit, but has eight on order that he plans to turn out into the field as soon as he receives them.