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W.Va. a testing ground for high-tech crime fighting tools from Illinois company

By VICKI SMITH

Associated Press Writer

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MORGANTOWN, W.Va. -- In the arsenal of tactics to outwit police, criminals have some low-tech tools: They can grow or cut their hair, gain or lose weight, or give a fake name to conceal their identities.

But lying is about to get harder.

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Sheriffs' departments in West Virginia's Northern Panhandle have started replacing paper arrest cards and Polaroid snapshots with electronic files, digital photographs and a fingerprint-photo system that will generate a unique ID number for anyone they arrest.

Deputies in Brooke, Ohio, Hancock and Marshall counties will use their own fingerprints to log into the system, which will let them

synchronize 30 patrol car laptops with a shared database at the start of every shift.

The fingerprint system is part of a two-pronged test of new technology from an Illinois company, says Ohio County Sheriff's Lt. Drage Flick. In December, the departments will begin using the EyeCheck, a binocular-style device that scans the reactivity of the human eye for drug impairment and sleep deprivation.

Both tools are important in policing the Northern Panhandle, a narrow strip of land sandwiched between Ohio and Pennsylvania and crisscrossed by east-west highways. While deputies have long had Breathalyzers to snag drunken drivers, Flick says EyeCheck is the first device that gives a pass-



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fail reading for sleep-deprived truck drivers and drugged motorists.

Though police lack the power to prosecute based solely on an EyeCheck scan, Flick says the device could help them temporarily get impaired drivers off the road. And in time, it could lead to more sophisticated follow-up testing.

EyeCheck and the fingerprint photo system also may prove a cost-efficient way for probation officers in geographically challenging states like Hawaii to keep a closer eye on offenders.

Richard W. Crawford, chief probation officer for the U.S. District Court in Honolulu, envisions a system that pairs EyeCheck with electronic kiosks where offenders can report to probation officers remotely.

Crawford, who is seeking a federal grant for his "vicarious supervision" concept, says the system would make the work of his 25 probation officers more efficient. It would also save money in a department where officers must fly between five Hawaiian islands to monitor 150 offenders, so he'll be watching the West Virginia experiment.

"I think this technology is very, very promising," Crawford says. "This is something the future is definitely going to hold for us."

Offenders could be compelled to report to secure places like police stations where they could be monitored by video, Crawford says. Local contractors could then collect blood or urine samples to verify the EyeCheck results.

Hawaii's probation department is thinly stretched and has less contact with offenders than Crawford would like.

"Other agencies that had helped us in the past are also being stretched," he says, "so we have to come up with other tools."

MCJ Inc. of Rockford, Ill., developed the EyeCheck in 1996. It's been on the market since 2001 and is now used in 38 states and seven countries, mainly as a probable-cause tool. A series of flashing lights gauges reactivity and compares it to a baseline, putting positive readings under one of seven categories of narcotics. That tells an officer additional testing is needed.

But MCJ President John Dal Santo says the EyeCheck also can help first responders by giving them a noninvasive way to test for toxic exposure after a chemical spill, train derailment or other terror attack.

The EyeCheck has proven 97 percent accurate for chemical exposure, Dal Santo says, and is now being used by first responders in Wisconsin, California and Nebraska.

West Virginia, though, is the first state to receive MCJ's fingerprint photo system along with the EyeCheck.

Flick says the database the four counties are building will not be linked to the FBI's national fingerprint database. Rather, it will let local law enforcement agencies instantly share information that is now cumbersome to obtain.

A \$500,000 federal grant is funding the program, and authorities are still deciding how much information about a suspect should go into the database. Sheriff's departments will not scan all 10 fingers, for example.

"The only thing the fingerprint has to do with this is a biometric ID, rather than a Social Security number or a name," he says.

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The Northern Panhandle is also sending 13 officers to a class in drug impairment recognition so they will be able to follow up a positive EyeCheck result with a series of noninvasive medical exams, Flick says. Those officers will later be tested at the jail in Maricopa County, Ariz., where they will evaluate suspects as they arrive.

Mark Neil, traffic safety resource prosecutor for the West Virginia Prosecuting Attorneys Institute, says about 40 states now allow drug-recognition experts to testify in court. West Virginia has no such law, so officers are often forced to release people who appear impaired but pass a Breathalyzer test.

Neil says drug-recognition officers are certified after being trained in a variety of medical procedures, including temperature, blood pressure, pulse, eye reactivity and more sophisticated sobriety tests.

There are only two ways to get that and other kinds of new evidence into the court system, Neil says -- by statute or with a test case appealed to the state Supreme Court.

"I think EyeCheck is at the beginning of that journey."

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