

Computer to scan for crooks visiting court

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Since January 2002, travelers at the St. Petersburg-Clearwater International Airport have been scanned by facial recognition technology.

For the past year, similar cameras have scanned the faces of people visiting inmates at the Pinellas County Jail.

But not a single arrest has been made on the basis of a face matching an image in a criminal database.

Now cameras are coming to court.

Beginning next week, two facial recognition cameras and computers, paid for by a federal grant, will be installed at Pinellas County's criminal courthouse. All visitors, except those younger than about 13, will be required to stop in front of a camera for several seconds to have their faces scanned before being cleared to enter.

Faces will be run through a computer with a database of at least 5,000 photos of criminals with outstanding felony warrants in Pinellas, or others wanted by the FBI.

People wearing glasses or hats may be asked to take them off if the items obstruct any part of their face.

"It's something like using a wanted poster," said sheriff's Lt. James Main, who runs the program for Pinellas Sheriff Everett Rice. "If you have a wanted poster at the front door - be on the lookout for this guy who threatened a judge - a bailiff might look at the poster and decide a visitor looks like that guy. A computer can just recognize images much faster than a human."

Bailiffs will have the discretion to wave through courthouse regulars, including lawyers and court clerks, without being scanned.

Prosecutors and public defenders won't be scanned because they already have passes to enter through other doors.

Defense lawyers call the new system an unnecessary invasion of privacy that will scare people away from courts and create a logjam at the entrance.

"How can they tell you that in order to come into a public building you have to take your glasses off and have your face scanned?" said Pinellas-Pasco Public Defender Bob Dillinger. "It's legal. It just doesn't seem right."

Main said computers will not save pictures, so the public need not fear their whereabouts are being monitored. And the process, he said, will be quick.

While no matches have been made at the airport or the jail visitor's center, Main said identical equipment is now routinely used at the jail to confirm the identities of inmates being booked or released.

"We see matches every day so we know it works," he said. "Sooner or later we're going to see an arrest."

Face-scanning equipment had little success at the Super Bowl held in Tampa in 2001. Tampa police say surveillance cameras still scan faces at Ybor City, though police could not immediately say how successful it has been.

Bruce Howie, a lawyer who is chairman of the American Civil Liberties Union's Pinellas legal panel, said the group opposes the cameras on constitutional grounds.

Howie said he fears deputies making arrests without sufficient probable cause. Courthouse visitors detained before absolute confirmation of identity would be improper, he said.

"When you start using face-recognition software that is not proven, it's subject to a high degree of abuse," he said.

Main, however, said it is no different than many tools previously used by police, from wanted posters to mug shots. At most, someone might be questioned for a few seconds while they are asked about their identity or asked for ID, he said.

The equipment is made by a Massachusetts firm called Viisage Technology Inc., and was paid for using proceeds of a \$3.5-million grant by the U.S. Justice Department. So far, Rice's office has received \$7-million from the federal government for facial recognition efforts in Pinellas.

Rice, who could not be reached for comment, also hopes to install face-recognition equipment in 50 cruisers by the fall, Main said.

The start date at the courthouse for the technology is Tuesday, though that's tentative.

"I think unfortunately George Orwell's 1984 foreshadowed what has come to fruition," said Jay Hebert, a criminal defense attorney.

