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TDCJ participates in FBI's iris identification pilot program

In 2013, the Federal Bureau of Investigation launched the Iris Recognition Pilot program as part of its larger Next Generation Identification (NGI) System, which uses fingerprint, palm print, facial recognition and iris scanning technology to create a searchable biometric database for use in criminal investigations and identification. Soon after startup, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice was invited to join other law enforcement and criminal justice agencies across the country working in support of the pilot program. Since then, TDCJ has contributed more than 110,000 prison offender entries to the FBI's iris scan identification database.

Iris scanning works by taking a picture of the color ridges around the eye, which are as detailed and distinctive biometric identifiers as fingerprints but, unlike fingerprinting, iris scanning can be done quickly, with no physical contact. The US military first used this technology in Iraq to identify authorized civilians who worked on base. Because it was a new technology, iris scanning was considered too expensive for use in law enforcement and corrections.



Holliday Unit Administrative Assistant Tamara Johnson scans the irises and takes the fingerprints of an offender as he is processed through the system.

Over time, decreasing costs associated with scanning and identification technology allowed the FBI to run a pilot program to test equipment and procedures so a system of best standards and practices could be developed. TDCJ's Classification and Records Assistant Director Joni White explained why the agency was selected for participation in the pilot program, saying "Knowing that TDCJ is one of the largest criminal justice agencies in the nation, the FBI knew we could assist them in very rapidly filling their database."

TDCJ's involvement in the FBI-funded program is specific to male offenders coming into the system. In addition to having their picture and fingerprints taken, both irises are scanned to complete the identification process. "When we scan the irises," said Intake Administrator Robert Compton, "the iris scans, fingerprints, state identification number and basic demographic information are sent to the Texas Department of Public Safety and then on to the FBI." The identification information is put into the database where it can be searched by authorized law

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enforcement and criminal justice organizations, and is also available to TDCJ Classification and Records employees during the offender release process.

“If an offender was scanned upon intake,” explained White. “Then upon release, we scan the iris again. Not only does the scan instantly let us know that we have the right offender, but it also tells us if he has a warrant out for his arrest or if he is on the terrorist watch list.”

The program is funded by the FBI and all iris-scanning equipment used by TDCJ was provided and installed by the FBI’s Criminal Justice Information Services Division, who also trained agency staff in its use. Operators and equipment will go through a professional certification process when iris-scanning identification becomes a full component of the NGI System. ●