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NIJ

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NIJ Helps Police to Exchange Driver's License Photos

OVERVIEW

The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) has teamed up with law enforcement agencies in four states in a pilot project to transmit driver's license photographs across state lines and deliver the photos to an officer's computer within seconds of a request.

Law enforcement agents often need to confirm the identity of people who are not carrying a driver's license or other form of identification. A person may offer a name and birth date to an officer, who can then get some basic information, including whether the person has a valid driver's license from any state in the union. Without a photograph, however, police do not know whether people are being truthful about their identity. A fugitive who is stopped for a traffic violation, for example, could well offer the name and birth date of a family member who has an out-of-state driver's license and a clean record.

PHOTO EXCHANGE

The pilot project to exchange driver's license photographs started in 2008 and includes North Carolina, Oregon, South Carolina and Virginia. The project is the first significant advance in the exchange of driver's license information since 1969, when states began making driver's license information accessible to police officers. Driver's license data typically include an address, date of birth, height, weight and ethnicity. Adding the capability to view a photo increases an officer's ability to make a positive identification and helps to keep officers safe. Also, using a photograph for positive visual identification can sometimes eliminate the need to detain someone simply for identification purposes.

NLETS COORDINATES DRIVER'S LICENSE EXCHANGE EFFORT

The International Justice & Public Safety Network, commonly known as Nlets, is coordinating an image-sharing system that allows law enforcement personnel to exchange driver's license photographs across state lines. This swift exchange of important public safety information in a secure environment provides law enforcement personnel with timely, accurate and necessary information.

Nlets is a nonprofit corporation chartered by the states. Members include federal law enforcement agencies, criminal justice agencies from all 50 states, the American territories and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

The pilot project is underway in North Carolina, Oregon, South Carolina and Virginia. Nlets is encouraging other states to join the photo exchange program. The computerized system uses the Global Justice XML Data Model (Global JXDM), an information-exchange standard designed specifically for criminal justice agencies that has been widely, but not universally, adopted. Read more about the Global JXDM at <http://www.it.ojp.gov/default.aspx?area=globalJustice>.

Police departments interested in joining the photo exchange program can contact Nlets. More information about Nlets and its various communications programs can be found on the organization's Web site at <http://www.nlets.org>.

The exchange of driver's license photos can also be used to help identify someone who is engaged in identity theft.

RESTRICTIONS

Some states cannot yet share fully in the system because of technical, budgetary or policy reasons. For example, some states have laws that specifically restrict sharing Department of Motor Vehicle (DMV) images with anyone outside the state and so prevent out-of-state law enforcement agencies from receiving images from such states. These laws are typically designed to protect the privacy of state residents. States that are not ready to participate fully in the driver's license photo exchange program can still use it to receive DMV images because the system can provide a great benefit to law enforcement agencies.

COORDINATION

The International Justice & Public Safety Network, commonly known as Nlets, is coordinating the image-sharing system. (The organization, started in 1963, has retained its original acronym for the National Law Enforcement Teletype System.)

Recent technical advances — including the development of XML, a computer programming language that eases the exchange of information on the Internet — have helped to make the exchange of photos possible.

In the future, Nlets hopes to add the ability to exchange other types of official photographs, such as booking and mug shot photos. Nlets has drafted model documents that can help states to address privacy and other policy concerns and ensure that their law enforcement agencies have access to the system.

Funding for the pilot program was provided by NIJ and the Department of Homeland Security's Directorate for Science and Technology.



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