

Birmingham News reports Hoover Police can track prints faster 02/04/2009

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Hoover police have a new technological tool in their arsenal of weapons to catch criminals. The department now has the computer capability to tap into the Alabama Bureau of Investigation's database to help match latent fingerprints left behind at a crime scene with potential suspects. It's called the Automated Fingerprint Identification System (AFIS). The fingerprint scanning technology allows a latent print examiner to do a fingerprint search in minutes that previously would have taken years.

Hoover police Detective Mark Tant said that before getting AFIS about four months ago, the department would mail prints to the state. It often would take two to five years to get a response because of ABI's workload, he said. Crimes against people normally would take precedence over burglaries and break-ins, he said.

Now, the examiner can scan prints gathered from a crime scene into a computer terminal at the Hoover Police Department that searches for a match with the more than 1.4 million fingerprint records on file with the ABI. "We can pretty much run anything immediately," Tant said. Tant, a crime scene investigator and the department's primary latent examiner, said the system develops a pool of candidates, but it's up to the examiner to make an independent identification. A search can take minutes to several hours. Tant said the clearer a fingerprint is, the better the results. "It is based on the latent print examiner's experience and training," Tant said. "It's not a magical system. It's a starting point. Once you make the identification, you have to go to court to prove that." Tant said print examiners also rely on other examiners to confirm their findings.

The Hoover Police Department now will be able to more easily check unsolved cases that have fingerprints available and for which the legal time limit for bringing prosecution has not ended, Tant said. "We can go back and revisit some of our older cases where there was not an arrest made and try to develop a suspect," he said. Tant said the new technology also gives police the capability to match a print gleaned from a crime scene that happens late at night, keeping them from having to wait until the next day to get a result on an urgent case.

The AFIS system came with a \$55,000 price tag and has a \$500 monthly maintenance fee, Capt. Jim Coker said. Sgt. Rod Glover, who heads the crime scene unit and helped lobby for the department to get AFIS, said Hoover is sharing its new technological tool with other departments, such as Pelham, Alabaster and St. Clair County because law enforcement officials are pursuing a common goal of putting offenders in jail and because criminals go into different jurisdictions. "If we can help them lock them up, it will keep them from coming here to commit a crime," Glover said.

Montevallo police relied on Hoover's AFIS to link suspects charged in a string of business burglaries to even more burglaries, said Mike Wilder, a Montevallo officer. "This helped us tie everything together," Wilder said. "It is a godsend to be able to go up there. Technology is getting better and better."

The Jefferson County Sheriff's Department and the Birmingham Police Department are among the area agencies with AFIS, Tant said.

