TECH b•e•a•t

Dedicated to Reporting Developments in Technology for Law Enforcement, Corrections, and Forensic Sciences

Share a Photo, Catch a Criminal

A pproaching the driver of a car stopped for running a red light, the officer asks for identification. After checking all of his pockets, the driver says he must have left his wallet at home and proceeds to rattle off a name and an address in another State. In the past, the officer might have let the driver go with a warning or a citation for not carrying his license. Thanks to a new program facilitated by Nlets (the International Justice and Public Safety Network), the officer requests not only the driver's information, but also his photo, from the neighboring State, and receives it directly in his patrol car. Confronted with a photo that obviously is someone else, the driver breaks down and admits he gave a friend's name and address to avoid the officer's finding out about his past criminal record.

During 2007 and 2008, Nlets applied grant funding received from the Office of Justice Programs' National Institute of Justice (NIJ) in an effort to take the lead on a pilot project that permits the exchange of departments of motor vehicle (DMV) driver's license images. The project deploys a limited operational capability to allow States to exchange electronic DMV images solely for the purpose of positive identification.

Phase I of the project went online in March 2008 when Oregon and North Carolina became the first two States to exchange photos. Since then, Nlets has immediately begun implementing the next phases of the program, which involve bringing other States online and establishing the exchange of other types of photos, such as inmate images and booking photos.

"Everything is going great. There are no performance issues at all," says Bonnie Locke, Nlets director of program management. "One thing we plan to do in the next phase is make sure that States that want to participate but aren't yet in a position to send photos out are able to receive them. This will still provide a huge benefit to States that aren't quite ready, financially or for other reasons, to send their photos out."

"This is a number one priority with law enforcement around the country," says George Ake of the Border Research and Technology Center (BRTC) in Austin,

Texas, which has provided support to Nlets on this project. "Being able to obtain driver's license photos is a huge concern in the field because officers want to know who they are really talking to. A lot of times officers have to let people go who need to be detained because they have no way of knowing their true identities. With this system in place, they can have the photo at their patrol car in a matter of seconds. It will save time, resources, and possibly even lives."

BRTC is part of the National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center System, which is a program of NIJ.

Some of the situations in which the availability of a driver's license photo could prove useful include the following:

- Confirming whether an individual is who he or she claims to be.

- Revealing instances of possible identity theft.

- Identifying a specific person sought in connection with a criminal activity.

"If the person stopped doesn't have a photo ID with them, officers only received physical descriptors such as height, weight, ethnicity, and so on," says Ake. "This might not provide enough information to verify identity. Using a photo for positive visual identification eliminates the need to detain someone solely for identification purposes."

Locke explains that the pilot States (initially North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia; Oregon came on board through its participation in a program sponsored by the Automated Regional Justice Information System, or ARJIS) were not necessarily selected because of technology they had in place, but rather because they were ready to move forward with the required information-sharing agreements. A major reason States have not moved toward this in the past is the political and policy ramifications surrounding sharing of photos. To help facilitate removal of those barriers, Nlets has drafted

model policy documents and procedures. Each State has its own rules, issues, and laws; Nlets does not attempt to dictate to them but merely offers a model, Locke says.

"What I hope will happen is that in States where it is more difficult to obtain access to photos (for example, some States require a written request on letterhead), law enforcement agencies will be able to say to the legislature that they are benefitting from getting photos from other States, and there would be even more benefits if they could also send photos out. We hope to build on this and spread it across the country over the next few years," Locke says.

There are also States that need to upgrade their technology, while others simply do not realize they already have the necessary technology and policies in place. Nlets is working to ensure that every State receives a presentation about the project.

For more information on Nlets, visit www.nlets.org; *for specific information on the project, contact Bonnie Locke at blocke@nlets.org.*

WHAT IS NLETS?

The International Justice and Public Safety Network, or Nlets, has been in the business of connecting law enforcement and the justice community for nearly 40 years. Today, Nlets is a state-of-the-art secure sharing system dedicated to the entire justice community. Its sole purpose is to provide for the international, interstate, and interagency exchange of criminal justice information. It uses leading-edge technology such as Web services and service-oriented architecture to serve its customers.

Nlets is a nonprofit corporation chartered by the States and funded by user fees. The members are all 50 States, the territories, all Federal agencies with a justice component, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.