

### Potentials for Digital Imaging in Law Enforcement

An analysis of usage by the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office  
By Deputy Kevin Mello

One of the biggest challenges for a Law Enforcement Agency in today's world of budget shortages is to maintain a high level of service, oftentimes with less money than the years before.

The Pinellas County Sheriff's Office Forensic Imaging Unit faced this dilemma, and has searched for innovative ways to provide photographs to investigators and attorneys, even while demand for these services was increasing rapidly. The decision was made to adapt new technologies being used in the private sector to fill the need. These technologies included Web Sites and Internets, and Digital Imaging, using computers, scanners, and digital cameras instead of film, paper, and chemicals.

The process has been a slow one, involving careful research and testing of various products on the market to see which would be suitable for our needs. With the large number of scanners, cameras, and software on the market, it would be easy to leap into a commitment without really studying the systems. Another issue was to prepare the way with the local State Attorneys Office, as they were going to have a large part of the burden of defending the new technology in court. After much searching, it was decided to take a slow, step by step approach to digital imaging.

Our first step was to find a way to get our crime scene photographs out to those who needed them without the costs associated with printing. To this end we began scanning negatives, and making them available over an existing network established by Pinellas County. Originally, we sent images to individual computers via FTP transfer, putting them on the hard drives of those who requested them. With the use of Web technology, we found a new method of delivering the images, and built an Internet site inside the County's protective firewall. Now, attorneys and detectives can view the images 24 hours a day, seven days a week. To add to the system, we purchased a high speed film scanner, which allows us to scan over 10,000 images a month. The effect of this combination was to provide more images than ever before at a tremendous savings to our budget; since our Web site came on-line in September of 1997, to April 1998, we have cut our printing in half, and saved an estimated \$13,000 in printing costs.

In the next few months, we will be acquiring seven mid-level digital cameras for documenting property crimes and other minor offenses. An analysis of our negative files disclosed that those types of cases comprise more than half our film consumption, yet less than two percent of them ever get printed for any purpose. With the digital cameras, we anticipate being able to cut our film budget, currently about \$30,000 a year, in half. Along with the cameras, we have also purchased a printing system which will allow automated printing of both digital camera images and scanned images. Replacing our traditional darkroom methods, it allows fast, quality output for the times printed photographs are needed, at as little as thirty eight cents for an 8x12 inch print. Also, improvements at the Pinellas County Courthouse Facilities, will provide image viewing capabilities in all the courtrooms, providing a larger more detailed image than ever possible before, all at an even lower cost to our Imaging Unit.

Digital Imaging has provided the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office with a way to provide better service, to more people, with less cost than any method used before. We are able to support our investigations and prosecutions faster and more efficiently. Legal challenges to the authenticity of digital images will lead to the establishment of legal precedent and case law. As that happens, we will be ready to expand our digital documentation to all types of crimes and scenes. Digital Imaging is still in it's adolescence, but in the not too distant future, may very well replace film as our primary source of evidence documentation.