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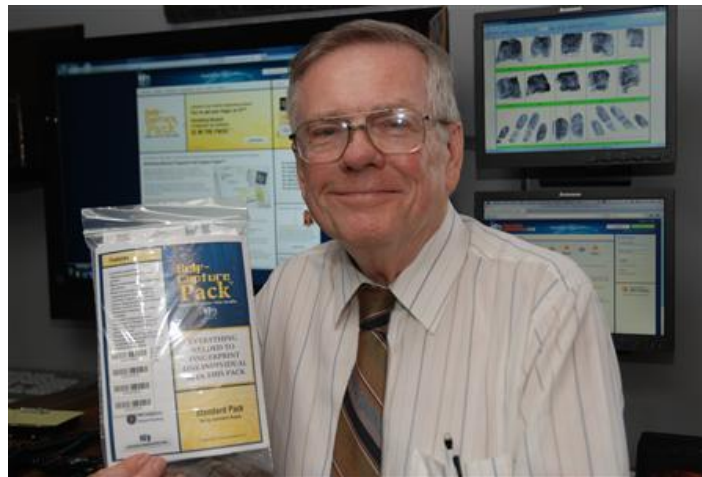
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ARTICLE

Vietnam vet develops "low tech" fingerprint solution

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By Deborah L. Cohen
CHICAGO | Wed Jun 15, 2011 1:35pm EDT

(Reuters) - David Allburn thought his counter-espionage days were over when the Vietnam War ended. But that background proved instrumental in developing a new way to fingerprint workers who require background checks.

"There had to be a way for a person to make some 70 or 80 samples of their fingerprints really fast and do them really well," said Allburn, a former Air Force engineer specializing in counter-intelligence who created National Fingerprint in late 2007. "It just didn't exist so we had to invent it."

The quest began about a decade ago when Allburn, now 70, sidestepped retirement to found what is now called the Safe Harbor Foundation to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse. The Ohio nonprofit regularly called on legions of volunteers, all required to undergo fingerprint checks before they could

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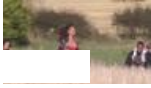
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work with kids.

"Fingerprints don't lie," said Allburn, whose venture was originally set up as part of the nonprofit. "We needed a way to print everybody in the room in a few minutes and get out of there."

The method he developed for National Fingerprint, which spun off from the foundation in 2009, provides a cheaper alternative to high-end biometric machines that scan fingerprints at a specific location, one person at a time. These machines cost \$10,000 or more.

Allburn's solution deploys "self-capture packs" with special paper and ink needed to obtain up to 90 separate prints from each individual under the close supervision of a witness. The results are then sent to Allburn's lab in Glouster, Ohio, not far from the West Virginia border. The economically challenged Appalachian Ohio region is also home to the foundation, which Allburn continues to run.

"It's roll your own," he joked. "That's what describes it."

MILLION-DOLLAR BUSINESS

A fledgling staff of six uses software to detect the most readable prints and sends them in digital form to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, where they are crosschecked for a match. Total cost to an organization is about \$70 per person.

"It's retro tech; low tech out in the field," said Allburn, who sees future applications of his product in technologically limited environments such as Third World countries. "That's what makes it portable."

The packs, which cost about \$25 each, are distributed by background screening companies, which sell them to a variety of nonprofits and companies around the country. Allburn, who is also developing retail sales, projects revenue will reach \$1 million by 2012.

He explained that National Fingerprint does away with the fear factor often associated with fingerprinting when organizations that can't afford to purchase the expensive machines and send their candidates out for police screening.

"It's the booking room where the criminals go, so it's not very seemly to send church volunteers and people like that," he said. Susan Eustis, co-founder of Lexington, Massachusetts-based WinterGreen Research, which tracks the security sector, is skeptical of a fingerprinting process that relies on remote witnesses for accuracy.

"If you make it really easy with a kit - how do you know the right guy took the test?" said Eustis, whose firm projects the fast-growing U.S. market for fingerprint devices is set to reach \$2.3 billion by 2017, up from \$730 million last year.

Allburn said he has that issue covered. He is forming alliances with groups such as The American Signing Connection, a network of notaries and signing agents, to train their members as "registered trusted observers." Corporations can also use their own trusted employees in that role, he said.

"It makes it easier on everyone, including the new hires and my staff," said Annette Henry, director of human resources for St. Petersburg, Florida-based G.A. Food Service Inc, a manufacturer and distributor that began using the self-capture packs last November. To date, it has screened more than 100 candidates.

"They're very cost effective," Henry said.

APPALACHIAN SUCCESS STORY

Allburn, who had planned to spend his retirement quietly as a wood worker, initially raised

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\$200,000 - one-third his own money and the rest from friends and family - to get National Fingerprint off the ground. But admitted he needed assistance when it came to developing a commercial venture.

"Once we could, we looked for some help from the state and the state sent in the MBA guys," he said, noting he got mentoring from Ohio University and local incubator groups, plus \$10,000 in state funding. "We all really moved fast from there."

Carol Humphreys, director of Muskingum County Business Incubator, a booster group that aided National Fingerprint with market research, said ventures such as this are helping improve the blighted region's reputation as a hotbed for entrepreneurial ideas.

"One of the advantages of National Fingerprint is that there are more and more needs for its services," said Humphreys, whose group interacts with some 200 startups a year. "We felt like there truly was a future."

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