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Masons provide ids for kids

By Debbie Garner
Staff Writer

SPRINGFIELD – Spectacular missing children cases, such as the alleged middle-of-the-night abduction of 14-year-old Elizabeth Smart in Utah, always bring the issue of child safety to the forefront for a brief time.

However, no area of the country is immune to such tragedies. According to Terry Garner, district chairman for the Chicopee 18th Masonic District's CHIPS (Child Identification Program) project, 25 children in Western Mass. are listed as missing and not accounted for.

It's every parent's nightmare. Could you put your hands on the necessary information to help authorities locate your child (or grandchild) quickly in the event he or she became separated from you, lost in the woods...or worse?

This Saturday, Eastfield Mall, in conjunction with the Chicopee 18th Masonic District, the Melha Shrine, Mass. Dental Society and Mass. Crime Prevention Society, is hosting a Child Identification Program in the Mall's Center Court from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

According to Eastfield Mall's Marketing Manager Sabrina Wilson, this is the fourth year Eastfield has hosted the CHIPS program.

The June 22 event will provide parents and legal guardians with the most up-to-date tools to help identify and locate a missing child. Each child's CHIPS packet will include fingerprints, a 360° videotape of the child, and the new

Toothprint™ impression, which also captures a minute sample of saliva that can be used to test DNA and to provide scent for search dogs.

The Freemasons of Massachusetts provide the entire service, including the take-home identification information, to parents free of charge.

"It's a little bit of hope in a bag in case something unfortunate happens to your child," said Wilson.

"We're preparing for between 400 and 500 children," said Garner. "This will be a popular event, given the recent events in Utah."

Garner said that Shrine clowns would be on hand throughout the day to entertain the children, and that the Shriners are also hosting a display of their go-carts and other vehicles for the kids to look at and sit in.

"We expect there will be a line," he said. "People shouldn't be discouraged."

Garner acknowledged waiting in line with a small child can be difficult, but he emphasized that to parents, having this information ready and accessible can be invaluable.

"We had an incident where a grandmother had taken her grandkids to a CHIPS program, and had the tape in her bag when the family went to Florida. The kids disappeared. She took the tape to a local TV station, and the children were found in two hours," he said.

Garner also emphasized that this event is a good time to update your child's CHIPS file if the last kit was created two or more years

ago.

"Kids change...[and even] the toothprint could change, especially with young children because they lose teeth," he said.

The CHIPS program, which began in 1994 through a collaboration between Boston's Grand Lodge of Massachusetts, the Mass. Dental Society and Mass. Crime Prevention Society, was the first program in the nation to provide parents with an all-in-one kit to help identify a lost or missing child. Recently, Garner said he and other Masonic lodges have been receiving calls from groups across the nation interested in starting their own child ID projects.

The next CHIPS event sponsored by the Chicopee 18th Masonic District will be held Aug. 17 and 18 at Smith & Wesson during the Tuned by Tuna Car Show.

CHIPS events are held across the state on a weekly basis by fellow Masonic lodges. To locate the next CHIPS event, go to www.MYCHIP.org.