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Sheriff's Office, Masonic Lodge team up for CHIP

By Tommy Culkin
Staff Writer

It's an experience almost every American knows — your phone buzzes as an alarm sounds, making you aware of a nearby AMBER Alert. Each year, millions of children go missing, and while the experience is nothing more than a phone notification for most, it can be absolutely devastating for the families directly affected.

To make sure no Rabun County children go missing, the Rabun County Sheriff's Office will soon be partnering with the local Masonic Lodge to expand the lodge's child identification program.

"We really like what they're doing, and we think that with our reach, we can get even more children signed up and protected," said Sheriff Chad Nichols.

Jeff Hunter, the president of the Rabun Gap Masonic Lodge, said the Childhood Identification Program, or CHIP, is offered by Masonic lodges throughout Georgia. Through the program, veritable dossiers

are compiled with children's vital information, including name, date of birth, medical conditions, emergency contact information and more. In addition to that basic information, the safety packets also include a picture of the child, a recording of the child's voice and a swab of DNA taken from the child's mouth. The entire process of creating a profile on a child takes just about 10 minutes and is free, he said.

"We really try to be as thorough as possible," Hunter said.

If a child then goes missing, the information is shared with local law enforcement agencies to help them locate the missing youth.

Hunter said parents are sometimes apprehensive and worry about the Freemasons keeping the information, but he said the information is burned onto a disc and the DNA swab is put in a container for the parents to keep, and then immediately deleted from the lodge's computers.

"We don't personally do anything with the information,



(because) we have no need to," he said. "We give it to the parents to put in a safety deposit box or whatever they want to do with it, but of course you hope they never need it."

Another misplaced source of apprehension stems from the program's acronym. Countless times, Hunter has had to assure parents they aren't implanting computer chips into

children's heads to track them. Once those misconceptions are cleared out of the way, the program has yielded successful results. Hunter said the Masons have registered hundreds of children with their program over the past several years.

Currently, one of the biggest hindrances to the program is the fact that it takes roughly

six to eight people to efficiently run. Another problem is simply visibility. Hunter said the Masons will offer the sign-up program at any event where they're asked to come. Despite this, they only attend a handful of events per year.

"Boy Scouts, church groups, festivals — we're more than happy to offer it at any events like that," Hunter said.

However, by partnering with the sheriff's office, Hunter and Nichols hope to see the scope of the program extended.

"We looked at it, and we thought we could definitely help them," Nichols said. "This is really beneficial and we're always looking for ways to improve safety."

Hunter added the program isn't just for young children, but can be used by people of any age.

"It's also really useful for the elderly, especially if they have dementia or anything like that," Hunter said. "We don't want to prevent people from utilizing something that's designed to keep them safe."