

On-the-spot DNA tests could be key to ICE verifying 'immigrant families' at border

by Anna Giaritelli | April 04, 2019 12:00 AM

The U.S. government has adopted a DNA testing system that would allow border officials to assess within two hours whether immigrants claiming to be in the same family are telling the truth.

Last June, the FBI approved the use of ANDE, an automated system which was developed with the military and can be operated by a nonscientist to process cheek swabs and other DNA. In October, it was used on human remains found after wildfires swept through Northern California. It is now under consideration by the Department of Homeland Security and could be used by Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Federal immigration officials believe the situation at the U.S.-Mexico border is about to become more complicated due to an uptick in falsified documents being used by migrants.

[Opinion: [How bad does border have to be for Democrats to admit it's an emergency?](#)]

"One of the things that we've seen a huge increase in and our partners in CBP [Customs and Border Protection] have seen, too, is the use of fraudulent documents," deputy director of ICE's Homeland Security Investigations arm, Derek Benner, said during a speech in Texas last week.

"Today when we're confronted with family units — I actually call them unverified family units because it's difficult to know but for the expertise of CBP officers and Border Patrol agents, who are able to question or interrogate that family situation based on the evidence that they have on their person and statements that they're able to get from the adults — they do the best they can, and then absent any other information their claim goes as is."

Part of the issue for federal law enforcement is not being able to [verify familial relationship](#) other than by paper documents.

ANDE DNA processing company says it can verify those relationships within two hours, compared to the weeks it usually takes local police or federal law enforcement to get results

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The sample is inserted into the machine and scanned. The machine locks down the sample and stores its information. The information can then be cross-referenced with an external database.

“Ninety minutes later we have an identification of that person, then we can swab the relatives and we can determine if they are blood relatives,” Mattern said. “But today, my understanding is there is no DNA that is being done at the port [of entry].”

ANDE was co-developed with the military when the Pentagon needed mobile DNA processing for missions in the Middle East and elsewhere. It had to be “ruggedized,” Mattern said, and able to be done in the back of a Humvee, something that would make it a good fit for the border.

Benner said the government is now “rushing” to catch up with the problem but said “interagency confusion” may delay a response.

The ANDE system, or one like it, is an obvious tool for CBP or the Health and Human Services Department's Office of Refugee Resettlement, which handles the release of unaccompanied migrant children.

DHS has made no announcement about using ANDE on the southern border or by immigration officers processing visa and green card applications.

