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Airports Ready For Registered Traveler Programs

Registered traveler has found its wings, and if everything goes according to plans, the airport security program should be up and flying across the nation by next summer. Based on the success of five initial pilot projects, as well as the ongoing Clear model program at Orlando International Airport, the federal Transportation Security Administration has given the green light to the biometrics based system of pre-screening registered travelers at participating airports.

The objective is to allow the pre-screened, registered passengers to go through a specially designated, quicker airport security line—much like the EZ-Pass system on many of America's toll roads—and thus allow the TSA to focus its regular airport screening on travelers who pose a potentially higher terrorism threat. The biometrics data will be embedded in a smart card.

Registered traveler has the enthusiastic backing of the American Association of Airport Executives. "The airports are definitely interested in moving forward with registered traveler," says Colleen Chamberlain, director of transportation security policy for the AAAE. "Basically, the feeling of the airports is that this should be an airport-driven effort. There is a role for the government, but it's something that should be driven by the airports and the private sector." The TSA will oversee registered traveler and conduct background security checks on individuals who apply for the prescreening and smart cards that will enable them to expedite their time passing through airport security. Private sector companies, including New York-based Verified Identity Pass (VIP), Blue Bell, Pa.- based Unisys, and Washington, D.C.-based **Daon**, will bid, airport by- airport, for the opportunity to administer the registered traveler program onsite. Steven Brill, CEO of VIP, the company that operates the Clear program in Orlando, estimates that it will cost roughly \$2 million for a company to set up registered traveler at an airport.

He said his firm, which charges participant travelers \$79.95 to enroll in Clear for one year, will lose money this year at Orlando but hopes to realize a profit in the second or third year of operation. Initially, finger printing and iris scanning will be used to identify registered travelers. Facial portraits and possibly other biometrics might be considered for inclusion in the future.

Driving the decision to go ahead with registered traveler was the unanticipated success it achieved during the five initial pilot projects (at airports in Boston, Houston, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C.) as well as in the Clear program in Orlando. “The pilot programs worked better than anticipated,” says Bryan Ichikawa, a solutions architect with Unisys, which ran three of the five pilot projects. “All of the participants had been a little nervous how it was going to work, or even if it was going to work. It was only after we did it that we become aware of the value it offered.” Kip Hawley, assistant secretary of the Homeland Security Administration and head of TSA, told a Congressional panel on Nov. 3, “The biometric identity verification technology performed accurately and rapidly under airport conditions...In addition, participants had an overwhelmingly positive impression of the program, and a desire to see the program continued and expanded.”

More than 10,000 travelers have enrolled in the Orlando program, even though at this point their smart cards cannot be used at any other airports. “The program is working very well,” says Carolyn Fennell, spokesperson for the Orlando International Airport. “It doesn’t bypass security. It merely expedites getting members in a designated line.” Two key decisions resulted from Orlando and the five earlier pilot projects. The first was to embed the identifying biometrics in a smart card chip. The second was to have private companies, not the government, operate the program at the airports. The key task facing all constituents in the registered traveler program today is to draw up universal standards so that each airport, despite its own idiosyncrasies and way of handling security, will offer travelers the same experience and procedures. That way, a registered traveler’s smart card will work at each airport participating in the program.

“Our group wants to see that programs going forward are interoperable,” says AAAE’s Chamberlain. “We want this to be a nationwide, interoperable program. We’re looking at how we can do this, both technically and as a business process.” The registered traveler Interoperability Council, a group of 60 airports interested in implementing the program, is now involved in designing the standards, along with interested vendors.

Daon, which has provided the underlying identity management system that stores biometric and biographical data for registered traveler, is heading and coordinating the Service Provider Council for the Registered Traveler Interoperability Council. **Thomas Grissen, the CEO of Daon**, says the task of defining an interoperable system and standards to be used by the RTIC will be completed and handed over to the RTIC by the end of this calendar year.

Brill says that VIP is not worried about what specific standards are promulgated, as long as they are system wide. “I don’t care what the standards are,” he explains. “But we need a template for fingerprinting and a template for iris scans. People need to use the same template or software to recognize them. The standards need to be vendor-neutral.” The TSA’s Hawley told the House Subcommittee on Economic Security, Infrastructure Protection and Cybersecurity, “Interoperability is defined as creating a biometric system in which the act of verification at any airport draws the same results regardless of the specific hardware and software used at the individual airport.” The challenge, he added,

“will be in defining a system requirement to allow for interoperability while maintaining a level field for competition among manufacturers.” The key to the program, says **Grissen**, is establishing a secure biometrics system that travelers are confident cannot be broached and cannot be victimized by identity theft. He says the airports and potential service providers have all been cooperating to attain that goal.

Grissen predicts that it’s unlikely that all 60 airports in the consortium will be launching a registered traveler program simultaneously next summer, despite their high level of interest. Gradual rollouts are more likely, he says. Brill says some thought had been given to allowing contactless cards to be used by passengers moving through the registered traveler lines, but that the concept was rejected for reasons of privacy.

“It’s not an extra piece of baggage we want to add,” he explains. He also says the idea of embedding the registered traveler biometrics into a regular credit card has been at least temporarily turned down. Focus groups unanimously said they did not want their financial transactions connected to where they travel, reports Brill. “It’s very feasible to do it,” he says, “but so far people seem to be very happy to have a separate card to do this.” And what happens if registered traveler becomes so popular that it sends as many passengers through the specially designated lines as are channeled through regular security lines at some airports? Not to worry, says Unisys’ Ichikawa. More lines will be added for registered travelers. “You don’t go into this business blindly,” he says. “We have very sophisticated modeling. Given that X-percent is at registered traveler, and we have one lane, we model at what point that registered traveler line has to expand. That’s part of what we do. We model the traffic flow at the airport.”