

# Effort to Speed Airport Security Is Going Private

## Move Aims to Expand Program That Preregisters People Who Travel Frequently

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The Homeland Security Department, under pressure to jump-start a program allowing select preregistered travelers to speed through airport security, is turning to the private sector for help.

The Registered Traveler program gives frequent air passengers access to special security lines, provided they first voluntarily undergo criminal and terrorist background checks. In exchange, they get a biometric identification card -- containing a fingerprint and other personal data -- and access to the shorter lines. The program has generally received favorable reviews from volunteers and the three-month trial has been extended indefinitely.

There is just one problem: The pilot program, currently administered by the department's Transportation Security Administration, is offered at only five airports for just 10,000 volunteers. This means that Registered Travelers can use their cards only at their home airports and nowhere else. TSA's pace at expanding the test into a national program has, so far, been the biggest complaint.

The slow introduction has prompted interest from some businesses, who believe that travelers would be willing to pay to participate in the program. Interested entrepreneurs include Steven Brill, who started *American Lawyer* magazine and Court TV and, after writing a book on Sept. 11, decided to get into the homeland-security business.

In a plan set to be unveiled in coming weeks, TSA officials will lay out some details of a privately operated Registered Traveler pilot program at Orlando International Airport. The success of the pilot, expected to begin by the end of March, could determine the future of the Registered Traveler program and be a model for expanding it nationally.

Mr. Brill and others have been pushing for TSA to privatize the program, saying that businesses are better equipped than the government to market and expand

it, especially because some travelers have indicated that they would pay annual fees -- as much as \$100 -- for faster screening.

TSA officials agree, believing that passengers, not taxpayers, should fund Registered Traveler, because it is likely to be used by business people rather than leisure travelers. Homeland Security officials are eager to see it move forward. TSA has had some false starts in other initiatives, and it has taken knocks for long lines and intrusive pat-down searches. But privacy advocates, who have already voiced concern about the government-run pilot programs, are even more worried now that TSA is turning to the private sector.

They complain that Homeland Security officials routinely publish privacy guidelines too vague to give the public a real understanding of how personal data are handled. A privatized system could exacerbate the problem, says Marcia Hoffman, staff counsel of the Electronic Privacy Information Center, a Washington nonprofit organization.

TSA sees private-sector involvement as a route to faster growth. "We're trying to encourage as much private sector participation as possible," says Justin Oberman, a TSA official in charge of both Registered Traveler and its more controversial sister-project, Secure Flight, a computerized prescreening system that will replace a system currently run by the airlines.

Plans to run the privatized pilot in Orlando were publicly disclosed in October, when AirTran Airways, a unit of Orlando-based AirTran Holdings Inc., said it would participate in the program. But efforts between TSA and the airport to reach terms on the pilot have dragged on.

One reason: TSA officials haven't decided whether to compile a master list of Registered Travelers, which could be used to check passengers at all participating airports, or allow private companies to maintain passenger data in a universal format easily accessed by competitors.

The Orlando airport hasn't yet chosen a vendor to run its test, although airport officials say they are in talks with Mr. Brill's New York-based company, **Verified Identity Pass Inc.** Verified Identity would essentially assume marketing responsibilities while its partners -- possibly including Lockheed Martin Corp. -- would install scanners, process applications and manufacture ID cards. TSA screeners, who are government employees, would continue to staff the security lines.

Orlando officials say their program will be open to all passengers, although they will likely first market it through airline frequent-flier programs. But unlike the current test, which is free to volunteers recruited through frequent-flier programs,

the Orlando program will eventually charge a fee. Some estimates put the cost to passengers at \$50 to \$100 annually.

"This is something people will voluntarily pay for at the right price," says Mr. Brill, who estimates the startup cost at between \$500,000 and \$1 million per airport. Initially, one Registered Traveler lane would be installed at the airport's east terminal, which serves Delta Air Lines Inc. and AirTran. Airport officials would later add a lane in Orlando's other terminal and likely open it to travelers on any airline.

Registered travelers are required to undergo the same security screening as other passengers, but usually in separate lines. They have to do the same basic things, such as empty their pockets of keys and other metal items or take a laptop out of its case. But they aren't randomly chosen for extra screening and must undergo secondary screening only if they set off a metal detector. At Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport, where 2,500 frequent Northwest Airlines fliers are enrolled, from 130 to 180 registered travelers use the special security lane daily, says Tim Anderson, deputy executive director for airport operations. They can move through security in as little as a few minutes. There are other concerns about private sector involvement. Passengers could grow so tired of being harassed at airport security checkpoints that they will feel compelled to join the program, says Ms. Hoffman, of the Electronic Privacy Information Center. "You worry that we'll get to a point where Registered Traveler isn't so much voluntarily as necessary to get through security with a minimum of hassle," she says.

On the privacy issue, TSA officials argue that they have written stringent protections for private data and that the program is voluntary. "We'd have less information about you than American Express or the airlines," Mr. Brill says. As long as the program is voluntary, and offers separate lines and shorter wait times, many will be willing to sacrifice on personal privacy, predicts Bill Connors, executive director of the National Business Travel Association and a registered traveler participant. "There are a lot of people who'd be up for it," he says.

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