



The feds, firms test E-ZPass of the air *Prescreening may ease frequent fliers' security travails*

By Faye Brookman

Published on September 19, 2005

Kevin Townson knows New York's airports all too well. A construction industry consultant, he flies here often enough to know that it can take longer to get from curbside to plane in this city than it does just about anywhere else. Those delays have left him increasingly frustrated. "I'd go naked to get through security lines faster," he says. The good news is that he may not have to.

The federal government is testing a program called Registered Traveler, which it hopes will become the E-ZPass of air travel.

"I jumped right on it," says Bill Maloney, chief operating officer of the American Society of Travel Agents. "Now I can bypass lines at the airport."

To register, he visited a kiosk at his local airport, presented two forms of government-approved identification (typically, people show a driver's license and a passport) and had his iris scanned by one machine and his fingerprints recorded by another. "It didn't take long at all," he says. It also didn't cost him any money.

Now when he leaves home to catch a flight, Mr. Maloney jumps into a special line, where machines verify his biometric information; his image appears on a screen to prove that he's cleared. He then zips to the head of the regular security line, where he must have his carry-ons screened and where, in many cases, he must still take off his shoes before walking through the metal detector. Still, the most he's ever waited in line is five minutes, versus 35 to 40 minutes before he registered.

The Transportation Security Administration doesn't expect to officially launch the program nationwide until the end of 2005 at the earliest. But it already has a competitor: Manhattan-based Verified Identity Pass Inc. **VIP**'s system has been running in pilot form since June at Orlando International Airport.

Out of the labyrinth

VIP is the brainchild of entrepreneur Steven Brill, of Court TV and The American Lawyer fame. In light of the security buildup that followed the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, he saw a need to provide frequent travelers with a way to cut at least one knot of traffic in airport terminals. Mr. Brill predicts that other private ventures will follow his lead. "We would welcome competition, because it makes everyone better," says Mr. Brill, who insists that government agencies aren't as well-equipped as private companies to run such programs.

The **VIP** system, which also features preferential airport parking, is open to people willing to fork over the \$79.95 sign-up fee and to submit their personal information and biometrics. Individuals cleared by the TSA then get a Clear membership card that they present to get access to the special Clear lane, currently available only in Orlando. **VIP** and its partner, Lockheed Martin Corp., project that there will be 80,000 Clear travelers in Orlando in three years. They are in talks to extend the test run to La Guardia and at least 20 other airports.

Many experts like the new systems because in addition to shortening security lines, such programs separate out lower-threat passengers so that officials can pay more attention to higher-risk travelers.

"It leaves the authorities a smaller haystack," says Bill Connors, executive director of the National Business Travel Association, who was among the first to sign on with Registered Traveler. Unfortunately, it also can create divisions within families. "The only problem is, I had to leave my wife behind on the line. She wanted to know how she could get cleared," says ASTA's Mr. Maloney.

GRAVE RESERVATIONS

Rob Eder, an executive editor for a Manhattan-based trade publication, spends much of his time in the air, or in lines waiting to get there. But he's not willing to part with personal information in order to receive Registered Traveler privileges. "That's too Orwellian," he says.

When E-ZPass was introduced, many people feared that Big Brother would be tracking their movements. Similar fears emerged with Registered Traveler, but have proved to be unfounded.

Privacy groups are not in favor of such frequent traveler programs, and they question whether joining up is truly voluntary. Barry Steinhardt, director of the Technology and Liberty Program for the American Civil Liberties Union, says the hassles of air travel are so great that obtaining clearance for available programs has become vital for those who fly frequently.

©2005 Crain Communications Inc.