

**Testimony of Deputy Assistant Secretary for Visas Tony Edson
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Subcommittee on Government Management,
Organization, and Procurement
“ID Cards: Reissuing Border Crossing Cards.”
Wednesday, June 25th, 2008, 2:00 pm
Room 2247, Rayburn House Office Building**

Chairman Towns, Ranking Member Bilbray and Distinguished Members,

Thank you for this opportunity to discuss what the Department of State is doing to meet the increased workload from the Border Crossing Renewal Program in Mission Mexico. The challenging task facing us is clear: in accordance with Section 104 of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City and constituent posts began issuing Border Crossing Cards (BCCs) with machine-readable zones and biometric identifiers to Mexican nationals in April 1998. Since cards issued to adults have a ten-year validity period, these cards began expiring in April 2008.

In fact, between 2008 and 2012, 5,751,315 BCCs will expire and therefore applications for new BCCs will surge. In FY-07, Mission Mexico processed 1.4 million visa and BCC cases. By 2012, the workload for visas and BCCs resulting from normal demand and the BCC renewal demand could approach or exceed 3 million cases, well beyond the ability of our current and planned staffing for these years which could handle up to 1.8 million cases.

Much of the surge demand will be temporary and cyclical to correspond with the 10-year BCC renewal cycle. Therefore, the Department has developed a

three-point strategy to meet the demand: first, implementation of new staffing programs to provide temporary and qualified staffing; second, augmentation of infrastructure to accommodate larger numbers of visa interviews; and finally, technology innovation to gain efficiencies and reinforce integrity in the adjudication process. I will address each of these elements in turn.

STAFFING

In order to supplement the workforce of the officers responsible for adjudicating BCC applications in Mexico during the anticipated BCC surge from 2008 – 2012, the Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA) has begun organizing the framework for a temporary workforce of consular adjudicators selected from highly qualified pools of applicants. This flexible workforce will allow CA to expand its workforce in Mexico to supplement consular officers on the interviewing line as required by workload at any given post in Mexico. In addition to assigning retired Foreign Service Officers for discrete periods of time, CA is implementing two additional programs: the Professional Adjudication Specialist program and the Roving Adjudication Specialist program.

The Professional Adjudication Specialist, or “PAS,” program will hire qualified American citizen Eligible Family Members abroad on Family Member Appointments under the Foreign Service Act to supplement adjudication capacity at posts. The qualifications to become a PAS will include language competency and the successful completion of the full consular officer training course, with which a PAS will receive a designation as a Consular Officer to perform visa and passport adjudications. Resident at post on their spouse’s official orders, PAS

adjudicators are the most cost effective and favored program to supplement adjudicator workforce capacity.

In addition to the PAS program for qualified Eligible Family Members, the Department intends to deploy Roving Adjudication Specialists, or “RAS,” to supplement permanent consular officer positions. The RAS program will hire qualified, carefully screened and fully-trained personnel as temporary consular rovers. The Department will deploy these personnel into the Foreign Service as one-year, renewable up to five years, Limited Non-Career Appointments (LNA) to work in Mexico where needed. These RAS employees, recruited from highly qualified pools, such as returning Peace Corps volunteers and participants in the National Security Education Program (NSEPs), will also be Spanish-speaking, fully trained consular officers, assigned to posts in Mexico for short tours. Mission Mexico will send RAS on temporary duty to posts as required in order to maintain low backlogs for consular services.

INFRASTRUCTURE

In order to accommodate the anticipated workload surge in BCC re-issuances, as well as demands for passport and nationality services from American citizens affected by the implementation of the WHTI land rule, the Department has developed a facilities strategy that will increase space available for BCC adjudication, especially visa interview windows, in our existing consulates and embassies to meet the temporary surge. This strategy is being executed within budget and with post-surge operations in mind as well. CA is working to ensure that requirements for the surge maximize existing space and that any new space acquired is appropriate for post-surge operations. To achieve this, CA is requiring

space that is ample for normal demand but that will also accommodate alternate staffing strategies during periods of highest demand.

To ensure that infrastructure and space requirements for the surge are met, CA has identified key regions to service BCC demand. The border regions typically see the most pronounced increases in demand. In the northeast of Mexico, Consulate General Monterrey will serve as a consular hub by accommodating overflow demand (as observed from 1998-2002) from our consulates in Matamoros and Nuevo Laredo. To accommodate this increase in Monterrey, the Department is currently expanding interviewing window capacity from 10 to 26 windows by the end of 2008. Staffed with 1.5 officers per window, Monterrey will be able to perform an estimated 700,000 interviews per year, using the newest technology CA can provide.

In order to accommodate BCC demand in the central border region, the Department will open a large new consulate compound (NCC) in Ciudad Juarez in September of 2008. This new facility, which will be one of the largest of its kind in the world, will accommodate about 100,000 immigrant visas, and up to 400,000 non-immigrant (including BCCs) visas per year. Consulate General Ciudad Juarez will also have significant capacity to accept passport applications and provide additional American citizen services. To the west, a new consulate compound in Tijuana will be completed in 2010, in ample time to handle the BCC surge, which according to projections should peak in 2011 there. The NCC will be able to accommodate all cases anticipated in Tijuana in 2008-2010, including overflow from Nogales.

Although we no longer issue BCCs at the three interior posts (Mexico City, Merida and Guadalajara), some BCC holders will apply there for visas in their passports (visa foils) as their BCCs expire. Demand for BCCs in the interior of Mexico was strong from 1998 to 2002, but generally started later and was not as pronounced as at the border. Mexico City is currently the world's second largest non-immigrant visa post. Demand during the surge is anticipated to move from about 380,000 per year to over 500,000 per year. An ongoing project to increase the number of interview windows from 15 to 23 will accommodate these numbers, especially with the incorporation of new technology and processes.

TECHNOLOGY

Innovations in technology enhance our staffing and infrastructure approaches as well as enhance efficiency and security. CA is piloting a new concept of visa processing, "Offsite Data Collection", or "ODC" in Monterrey and Nuevo Laredo. The pilot currently under evaluation allows visa processing posts to move non-governmental visa processing functions to an off-site contractor.

Currently, a contractor operates Applicant Service Centers (ASC) according to specifications provided by the U.S. Government. In order to allow consular personnel to focus on critical governmental activities such as security and integrity of the visa process, the contractor performs many non-governmental functions, all of which are paid for by the visa applicant. Under ODC, the applicants pay the Machine Readable Visa (MRV) fee to a commercial bank while paying the nominal customer service fee as a separate payment. This customer service fee allows the applicants to call the contractor's call center for visa process information and make an appointment to the ASC. This appointment can be made

for after-hours or even Saturdays, during times the consulate is normally closed. The applicants fill out a visa application on line in our new Consular Electronic Application Center (CEAC) and print out a confirmation form. When the applicants arrive at their ASC appointment the contractor scans their fingers, takes their photo, and arranges for courier services to return documents to the applicant.

The biometric information collected by the contractor is then transmitted electronically to the CEAC form and linked with the applicant's application. This has the advantage of giving consular officers all of the information in the visa application in advance of the interview appointment. All database checks are conducted by relevant U.S.G agencies prior to the applicant's personal appearance before the consular officer.

Upon arriving at the consulate at the appointment time, the applicant moves straight to the interview, bypassing all the waiting in line and other steps that were necessary under the old process. The consular officer verifies the applicant's fingerscans and then conducts the interview. The consular officer has all the information from all databases available to him so that the interview can be targeted to specific issues that may need to be resolved with the application. The consulate has also conducted fraud screening before the applicant even arrives for the interview. This process allows a consular section to make more efficient use of its space and personnel resources for functions that are inherently governmental, such as visa adjudication. This initiative is the key to the successful use of existing facilities without expensive, permanent construction.

Upon completion of the pilot, CA will expand the program to all posts in Mexico and to other high volume posts worldwide. ODC is being piloted as a

contract modification to a pre-existing contract with Computer Sciences Corporation (CSC) to provide telecommunications services to visa applicants in Mexico. This has allowed CA to more quickly and efficiently pilot ODC in preparation for the full and open request for proposal (RFP) later this year for expanded services on a more global basis.

BORDER CROSSING CARD

In its July 2007 report “Security of New Passports and Visas Enhanced, but More Needs to be Done to Prevent their Fraudulent Use,” the GAO recommended that the Department reassess security features and redesign travel documents on a regular basis. The advent of the BCC renewal program has offered the Department just such an opportunity to redesign the next generation of Border Crossing Cards.

Later this fall, the Department will begin to replace the current BCC, produced under a DHS contract, with a new and much-improved card design. The card, modeled on the new passport card, will incorporate an improved design, RFID technology with read capacity consistent with other documents used by State and DHS, state-of-the-art security features and laser engraving. Since the new BCC will be produced from the same card stock as the new passport card, it will incorporate the same overt, covert and forensic security features as the passport card, making it as tamper and counter-resistant proof as possible.

The artwork design will be substantially different so that there can be no confusion between the two cards. The new BCC will have a design reminiscent of the Southwest topography of the U.S., a distinctive color and geometric design, and a differently shaped Optical Variable Device (OVD) or kinegram.

The Department believes the physical security of the card itself is paramount and has included a wide range of security features to ensure the security of the card. In designing the passport and BCC cards, the Department reviewed a wide range of available security features and consulted with the inter-agency community and especially with the Department of Homeland Security's Immigration and Customs Enforcement Forensic Document Lab (FDL) to make the card as secure and durable as possible. As a result of this collaboration, the card's design includes multiple layers of overt, covert, and forensic security features which provide safeguards against tampering and counterfeiting and which also provide easy visual and tactile verification to Customs and Border Protection officers at ports of entry.

The most obvious security feature is laser engraving which is extremely difficult to forge or counterfeit, in place of standard photo dye sublimation images used in standard identity cards. The photograph on the BCC card will be laser engraved into the multiple layers of the card, becoming an integral part of the card material. Contrary to recent media reporting, the laser engraved photograph cannot be removed with a solvent.

Although the BBC is designed to be read by either RFID or by Machine Readable Zone readers, it is also critical that the card be secure on "face value" for inspection. Therefore, to provide easy visual and tactile verification and to enhance the integrity of the card, the Department is using state-of-the-art technology to embed an optical variable device (OVD), or kinegram, inside the card, rather than stamping it on the surface. The embedded OVD overlaps the lasered photograph with the personalized data, and any attempt to alter the OVD

will destroy the integrity of the card. The embedded OVD is easily recognizable on the face of the card by sight and touch, and provides for quick inspection and verification that the card is genuine.

To meet the operational needs of U.S. Customs and Border Protection Officers at land and sea ports-of-entry, the BCC contains a vicinity-read (RFID) chip which serves as a pointer to a stored record in a secure DHS database. There is no personal data to the chip; the chip will only have a number that can be read by authorized CBP readers mounted at traffic lanes at ports of entry. The number will point to the database; personal information of the card holder will be relayed to CBP officers' screens as the card holder approaches the inspection booth. Because the card design does not include any technology that would encode or encrypt bio-data, identity data cannot be tampered with or manipulated, eliminating the possibility that a new or false identity could be associated with the card.

In accordance with current law and consistent with congressional interpretation, the BCC contains a biometric identifier in the form of a digitized photo. Fingerprints collected from the applicants are stored in DHS's IDENT database, but can be confirmed by index finger scans at ports of entry. This represents a shift away from encoding data on cards, which are susceptible to manipulation and degradation. All data linking the card bearer to the card itself is maintained in a secure government database. To provide for those situations where the card cannot be read by RFID or MRZ, the card will contain the same embedded kinegram as the passport card for easy and quick visual and tactile verification by a Customs and Border Protection officer.

The Department wishes to acknowledge the cooperative working relationship with the GAO team in their current review of our plans to prepare for the workload demand in Mexico generated by the BCC renewal program.

Thank you again and I welcome your comments.