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Airports Test System to Thwart Terrorist Access

Critical to the mission of aviation security is assuring that our jets and airliners are secure on the ground, as well as in the air. Jets and planes sit in hangars and terminals while being serviced and maintained by airport staff. The federal government must take every precaution to ensure that individuals who have access to planes prior to boarding have the proper credentials and have been appropriately screened.

In the coming weeks, the Transportation Security Administration will launch a pilot program to test the use of biometric technology to control access to secure airport facilities. Under this program, employees will gain access to secure areas of airports only if their fingerprints or eye scans match the special information stored on their biometric identification card. Since biometric identifiers are unique to each person, this method will help ensure that stolen identification cards are not used to gain access to protected parts of the airport.

This pilot program will be tested at eight airports across the country: Newark, New Jersey; Miami, Florida; Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota; Boise, Idaho; Savannah, Georgia; Fort Myers, Florida; Tampa, Florida; and Providence, Rhode Island.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has also has launched similar programs to verify the identity of workers in other transportation areas. The Transportation Worker Identification Credential program, administered through DHS, will provide a uniform, tamper-resistant identification card for workers in the transportation industry that will incorporate biometric identification to prevent theft and duplication by unauthorized users.

The Homeland Security Department has warned federal, state, and local authorities that terrorist groups have tried to obtain official identification, uniforms, and vehicles to commit terrorist attacks. There have been several terrorist attacks overseas in which stolen credentials and equipment have been used for terrorist purposes. For example, the attack in October 2003 on the Baghdad office of the International Committee of the Red Cross involved the use of a stolen ambulance. In November 2003, Al Qaeda members attacked a residential community in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia by disguising themselves as police officers.

Homeland Security Chairman Christopher Cox believes that the use of biometric identifiers is an important way to enhance transportation security and supports the pilot program. As the pilot program is implemented and assessed, TSA should consider how to adapt the biometric technology for other modes of transportation, such as access to port facilities. The Homeland Security Committee will have the opportunity to discuss additional ways in which TSA can improve airport security with Steven McHale, Deputy Administrator, TSA later this week. Mr. McHale will testify before the Infrastructure and Border Security Subcommittee hearing next week on May 12, 2004.