





Mayor's Task Force II on International Travelers

Report of Findings and Recommendations



City of Houston January 2008

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Introduction

Background

As the United States continues to experience a decline in overseas travel, federal and local government officials remain unwavering in their resolve to project the U.S. as a friendly, hospitable country equipped with the proper infrastructure and resources necessary to welcome international visitors for leisure, study, medical care, and business. While this is essential for the growth of the U.S. economy, officials recognize that national security must continue to be the main priority.

The City of Houston (COH) is in a unique position among American cities with a combination of factors that make homeland security matters a particular challenge, such as geographical/border location, status as the nation's energy capital, and broad demographic of multiple nationalities. Although government officials are aware of their responsibility to its local residents, the City of Houston is also conscious of its responsibility to the diverse population of international travelers arriving through its gateway. This includes, foreign citizens employed in the U.S., foreign-born U.S. citizens, permanent residents (green card holders), and in-transit passengers.

As the fourth largest city in the U.S. with one-third of the economy based on international business, improvements in Houston's entry process experienced by international travelers shall significantly impact the U.S. and simultaneously negate competitive losses experienced by the Houston economy. Therefore, the Houston Airport System (HAS), fourth largest airport system in the U.S., sixth largest system in the world, and seventh largest international passenger gateway in the country, instituted changes at George Bush Intercontinental Airport (IAH) that resulted in considerable enhancements to the premier international entry-point for the south-central U.S. As a result of COH and HAS efforts, in January 2006, IAH, along with Washington Dulles Airport (IAD), was recently designated a "model port" under the Rice-Chertoff Initiative (RCI) to ensure a more welcoming environment for international visitors

The Rice-Chertoff Joint Vision, Pilot Model Port Concept

The Secretaries of the Department of State (DOS) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Condoleezza Rice and Michael Chertoff, recognize the balance between security and the need to welcome visitors to the United States. In the article, "Rice-Chertoff Joint Vision: Secure Borders and Open Doors in the Information Age," it is stated:

"The United States is a welcoming country, encouraging citizens from all over the world to visit, study, and do business. While security remains paramount, we will ensure that the experience of travelers reflects this welcoming spirit, and shows that the U.S. is open to business travelers, tourists, and students, while ensuring that our homeland is secure."

Their initiative focuses on 1) renewing America's welcome with improved technology and efficiency, 2) developing travel documents for the 21st century, and 3) developing "smarter screening" of travelers.

IAH and IAD were designated as the two "model ports" for this initiative to test approaches designed to improve the information distribution, processing of travelers, and infrastructure needs that are critical to achieving the RCI goal of creating a transparent and welcoming environment for individuals traveling to the U.S.

Mayor's Task Force on International Travelers

Extra security measures implemented after 2001 created a more complicated entry process for international travelers visiting the United States. Moreover, the Houston entry process was found to be more time-consuming than other U.S. ports of entry. As a result, in 2003, Mayor Bill White, appointed the "Taskforce on International Travelers," comprised of key business and political leaders in the community, to study the issue and recommend ways to streamline the entry process at IAH.

The initial task force was successful in documenting the major problem areas and formulating appropriate recommendations that assisted in alleviating many of the significant identified problem areas. Subsequently, a second and current task force was assembled to continue the efforts and build upon the successes of the first task force.

The Task Force collaborates closely with the Department of State, the Department of Homeland Security and U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP).

The current task force adjusted their objectives and dealt heavily with federal issues collaborating with DHS and DOS on the Rice-Chertoff Initiative. In January 2006, IAH and IAD were selected as the two ports of entry to be used as pilot sites advancing the efforts and developments achieved by the Task Force.

The current task force is led by Co-Chairpersons Ambassador Djerejian and Ambassador Schechter and includes four ad hoc subcommittees. Each subcommittee represents a specific area of focus: business, tourism, medical and education.

Purpose and Scope

Analysis of the findings and recommendations reported by the subcommittees indicate that the following objectives shall continue to be relevant for the current task force and the subsequent third task force. The four subcommittees concurred on the following points and address these issues in their recommendations:

Task Force Objectives

- 1) Work in close collaboration with DHS and CBP:
 - · Continue efforts to decrease arrival wait time
 - Continue efforts to decrease secondary interview wait time
 - Continue to ensure adequate CBP staff are available to handle the increased international passenger traffic at IAH
 - Continue efforts to implement education program for CBP officers regarding the professional customer service and cultural sensitivity training necessary to effectively and efficiently work with international travelers arriving at IAH

2) Work in close collaboration with DOS:

- Decrease visa application wait time for international travelers
- · Decrease interview wait time for international travelers
- Provide international travelers consistent and accurate information regarding visa issuance and point of entry process
- Continue to ensure maximum dissemination of forms and information on National Security Entry/Exit Registration System (NSEERS) to visitors prior to their arrival in the U.S.
- Advocate for the automation of the I-94 form

The four subcommittees of the current task force were charged with addressing (1) challenges that legitimate international travelers continue to encounter when visiting Houston and (2) recommending further process improvements to help facilitate the entry of international travelers into Houston and the U.S. while ensuring that ineligible individuals and those representing a security risk are prevented from entering.

The information presented represents data collected by the four subcommittees during the period of June 2006 to March 2007 from various industries and the overall community. The sources of information include reviews of complaints and anecdotal accounts of experiences at IAH from businesses and industries, international patients, international students, observations made by members of the Task Force, and published news and DHS material. The recommendations suggested by the subcommittees were provided in March 2007 based on these findings. Since that time, ongoing communication and collaboration with RCI officials has occurred along with the implementation of a number of the recommendations. The current status of the recommendations is indicated in blue italics. Results indicate that the Task Force is consistent with the observations and efforts of the Rice-Chertoff Initiative and that continued efforts to implement recommendations have improved the experience for international travelers as well as positively impacted Houston's economy.

Task Force Subcommittee Findings and Recommendations

Business Subcommittee Overview

The economic security of the United States is vastly dependent upon our ability to actively engage the international community in commerce. In Houston, for example, energy companies must be able to engage representatives of producing states to secure access to oil and natural gas resources that are vital to our economy. The global competition for these resources means that if the U.S. unilaterally imposes onerous entry restrictions affecting interior ministers, national oil company managers, or other individuals responsible for the development and sale of their country's energy resources, existing and potential partners may be inclined to conduct business in other countries where the restrictions do not exist. This is true for virtually all Houston based industries. Companies exporting goods and services abroad depend on their ability to bring key personnel to this country to facilitate management, formulate key strategies, aid research and development, conduct training and otherwise fully integrate the operations of their overseas partners, customers, suppliers, subsidiaries and affiliates.

Business Subcommittee Findings

- The number of B-1/B-2 visa denials continues at a high rate. This is particularly true for foreign
 nationals who are not with well known multinational companies or who are not eligible for entry
 under the Visa Waiver Program (nationals from most European countries, Japan, and a few from
 Latin America are eligible).
- As a general rule, beyond the administrative process, applicants from developing nations have a
 more difficult time with the burden of proof under Section 214(b) of the Immigration and Nationality
 Act to prove that they do not intend to immigrate to the U.S. As a practical matter, that means that
 U.S. consular officers have limited resources available when deciding whether or not to issue the
 visa, and those discretionary denials are not subject to any effective form of administrative or legal
 review.
- Visa delays at U.S. embassies range from two days at Abu Dhabi to 56 days at Manila. This is
 often due to the lack of consular officers available to process the high number of visa requests.
- Individuals being referred to secondary inspection are a primary source of delays, ranging from 30 minutes at other ports of entry to several hours at IAH. This is particularly true for travelers (with visitor visas, temporary work visas or even permanent residents/green card holders) from Middle Eastern and predominantly Muslim countries that are subject to NSEERS registration.
- Traffic growth has increased by approximately seven percent a year since the inception of CBP in 2003. The number of international flights arriving into IAH has also increased since the opening of the new Federal Inspection Services (FIS) Facility. Although the number of passengers arriving steadily increases, the number of booths manned with CBP officers does not. Limited staffing flexibility and significant variation in passenger arrivals provide a difficult scheduling environment.

CBP is not able to increase the number of officers available due to lack of manpower and overtime creating an issue with wait times. The wait time should be under 60 minutes from the moment the plane arrives (block time) to the last passenger passing through primary passport inspection.

Business Subcommittee Recommendations

- Current visa issuance resources are inadequate. Measures should be taken to ensure that visa
 intake, review, processing and issuance functions are appropriately staffed and that consular
 officers are provided with expanded online resources needed to process requests.
 The number of consular officials (e.g. India) has been increased. Visa wait times are posted on
 DOS website and are decreasing
- Education program regarding business travel patterns from various regions should be established and provided to consular officers worldwide.
- Business visa applications should be expedited promptly, particularly those of importance to the U.S. business community. This would be accomplished by:
 - establishing times for business visa appointments.
 Instituted at select posts
 - establishing an on-line appointment reservation system.
 Being instituted at an increasing number of posts where city/country has necessary infrastructure
 - utilizing video conferencing to conduct interviews.
 Being tested in the United Kingdom
 - development of mechanisms to support the electronic submission of required application forms, and exploitation of other procedures that fully leverage available information technologies.
- Resources available to the Business Visa Center should be expanded to further improve the
 processing of business related visa applications. Encourage the development and use of
 sponsorship letters/credentials by host U.S. companies to facilitate the expeditious processing of
 foreign business employees, partners, customers, suppliers and others entering the U.S. for
 business purposes.
- Establish comprehensive, objective criteria for the denial of visas to guide consular officers who
 are called upon to review visa applications. Where feasible, communicate the specific reasons for
 the denial of a visa and allow the applicant to provide further information that may ameliorate the
 issue preventing visa issuance.
 Proposal has been initiated to increase waiver countries and increase visa grants by DOS
- Provide an administrative appeal mechanism to review visa denials that are not supported by and substantive reasons. In addition, the metrics for evaluating the performance of consular officers should be refined to ensure greater consistency in visa determinations.
- Travelers should be required to provide personal data to the U.S. government only once, regardless of which agency collects it. Information barriers between and among all government agencies that currently slow the admission process should be removed, e.g., all information pertaining to the eligibility of a traveler entering the U.S. should reside in a single accessible information data base with enhanced systems integration to ensure timely and accurate decisions to detect ineligible aliens, uncover fraud and improve the efficiency and security of visa processing. The data should be properly associated with the travel credentials (machine readable passport, E-Passport, or "trusted traveler" card), current and electronically retrievable as necessary by government agents. DOS and DHS are collaborating to synchronize their systems

- Expedite the rollout of E-Passports with secure chips in which biometric and biographic
 information is written in order to eliminate delays associated with common names on watch lists
 and improve the efficiency and accuracy of personnel conducting border entry formalities.
 E-Passport has been initiated
- A "trusted traveler" card (biometric credentialing) for business travelers should begin
 immediately. Business travelers would pay a fee to procure a biometric access credential similar
 to the controlled access card (CAC) commonly in use throughout the military and all
 government agencies if they could be assured that the credential would expedite their entry into
 the U.S.

"Trusted traveler" card is currently in legal process at DHS

- Communicate information concerning border entry procedures, required forms and available
 assistance to travelers during and following admission formalities to the U.S. through the use of
 multilingual brochures, video messages, the internet and other means. Ensure that required
 forms (and translations) are made available to travelers for completion well in advance of
 admission processing.
 - DHS/CBP entry process information, "know before you go" and DOS/DHS/Disney informational videos currently being shown to travelers
- The number of CBP inspectors should be increased at IAH to reduce wait times at primary and secondary processing. Personnel recruitment should encourage foreign language fluency and multicultural experiences.
- Cultural sensitivity training of CBP personnel should be provided to all staff, particularly with respect to cultural groups they will regularly encounter.
- The local business community should assist CBP personnel in understanding the role that foreign travelers play in enhancing the economic security of the U.S. by providing necessary information and if needed, training. Representatives of the business community should regularly engage CBP, DOS and other government agencies with the goal of promoting a greater mutual understanding of competing concerns and the identification of additional steps that can be taken together to improve the process.
- NSEERS waivers should be granted to low risk, frequent travelers to IAH, i.e. travelers who
 have successfully registered previously and who do not pose security threats or any other
 concerns.
- An anonymous, non-attributable survey mechanism to collect and collate travelers' experiences in Houston should be implemented to facilitate continuous improvement in the delivery of services.

Implemented by IAH, Walt Disney, Airport Councils International (ACI), Department of Commerce (DOC)

Tourism Subcommittee Overview

Due to the immense impact it has on the economy, cities and countries worldwide are competing to increase their share in global travel and tourism; this includes leisure, business, conventions and meetings, educational and medical travel. Because of this intense international competition, the policies and procedures for entry into the U.S. as well as customer service have a tremendous influence on the traveler's decision to visit the U.S. and Houston. If the current entry process into the U.S. continues, tourists will simply choose to visit more hospitable cities and countries whose entry requirements are less stringent.

Tourism Subcommittee Findings

- The three major international niche markets for Houston are 1) international group business to Houston from Mexico, 2) individuals traveling for leisure and business purposes to Houston from Mexico, and 3) individuals and groups traveling to Houston for leisure, business and/or medical travel from the Middle East. These niche markets are the most profitable for Houston area hotels that cater to international travelers and affect countries that do not have visa waivers.
- It is estimated that approximately three million visitors traveled by air or car to Houston from Mexico in 2005 and the majority chose to book lodging within the Galleria area. An average expenditure is \$915.00 per visitor, per trip, within our city. This is significantly higher than their American counterparts. The bulk of the hotels within the Galleria area focus their sales and marketing efforts towards visitors from the country of Mexico.
- Although formal studies have not been completed on the specific spending habits of visitors to
 Houston from the Middle-East, 100% of the Houston-based hospitality industry experts within
 this subcommittee describe this group as high end travelers whose expenditures are the
 highest of any other international region.
- According to the report by Discover America Partnership "Foreign travel to the U.S. is down by 17% since 2001and 56% of foreign visitors thought CBP officers are rude and 66% of foreign visitors said they feared being detained when entering the U.S." This is consistent with the findings at IAH.

Tourism Subcommittee Recommendations

- Embassy and consular office staff should be increased to address the rising demands for visas
 placed on the individuals working in those offices.
 The number of consular officials (e.g. India) has been increased. Visa wait times are posted on
 DOS website and are decreasing.
- Consular staff worldwide should receive cultural sensitivity training.
- Provide the general traveling public with more information on policies and procedures for entry into the U.S. If necessary, work with the Visit USA offices throughout the world to distribute this information and educate travel professionals on these regulations.
 DOS re-launched consular affairs website with enhanced information on visas, passports and application procedures. DHS/CBP entry process information, "know before you go" and DOS/DHS/Disney informational videos currently being shown to travelers.

- Conduct a major advertising campaign in top international markets informing potential customers
 that we are open for business. In addition, when large groups are traveling to the U.S., assign
 one individual to the group that can help expedite all reasonable visa requests to the U.S. from
 within that group.
- Complete the list of "trusted travelers" to the U.S. in order to avoid the continual impression that
 all travelers to the U.S. are a threat to our security assisting legitimate travelers to easily move in
 and out of the country positively impacting the general economy of the nation.

Medical Subcommittee Overview

Medical tourism presents an opportunity for the United States to fuel growth by tapping the potential of the international patient market. The U.S. is known for its distinguished medical standards and practices resulting in a high demand for services from the international community seeking the finest health care, particularly in Houston at the Texas Medical Center (TMC). TMC is the largest medical district in the world with 46 non-profit, medicine-related institutions dedicated to patient care, research and education.

With the tightening of immigration rules and security checks, the U.S. has seen a decline in the number of international patient visits. More patients, especially those in the Middle-East, are moving towards such alternatives as the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Australia, whose entry requirements cause less delay. Delays are especially crucial for patients requiring immediate medical procedures. Strict entry requirements have a great impact on a patient's decision to travel to the U.S. for treatment and therefore, propose serious challenges for TMC and the Houston regional economy.

Medical Subcommittee Findings

- Institutions in the TMC treated approximately 40,000 international patients annually prior to 9-11; now it currently serves only approximately 10,000 international patients each year.
- The process of security checks is too extensive and time consuming for the ill patient and has
 resulted in international patients traveling to other countries for health care; the patient cannot
 wait for visas to be issued for the US. Notably England and Germany have reduced wait times
 for security checks and are able to welcome the traveler within a few days.

Medical Subcommittee Recommendations

- Although security checks should be enhanced to a high level of alertness to ensure that the
 international traveler arriving at IAH is visiting for the reasons stated, mechanisms should be
 implemented to ensure that those who are traveling to Houston/U.S. for legitimate reasons are
 permitted entry with no delays.
- The U.S. should begin to take advantage of the concept already being utilized in the Transportation Workers Identification card and also purposed in the "trusted traveler" program. This card contains bio-data specific to the individual and allows entry to workers in critical infrastructure facilities. It could be requested by anyone who may travel to the U.S. in the future on business, as a patient, or for leisure. With no specific need in mind, the application and security check process could go forward without inconvenience to the prospective traveler.

- Equipment for the "trusted travelers" application and training for appropriate staff could be housed
 in a TMC medical facility. For patients with visas, security would have recently been completed on
 the individual. This card would facilitate the visa application process in the future after issuance
 of a card, utilizing a card reader with connection to a data base could then be used to swipe the
 card and determine its validity at any DOS Office of Foreign Missions.
- Leadership from both DOS and DHS, with special emphasis on CBP, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Citizen and Immigration Services (CIS) should be involved in the initial protocol of the "trusted traveler" program and appointed to work with officials at IAH and the Mayor's Task Force on International Travelers to assure appropriate completion of the deliverables on an agreed upon timeline.
- A dedicated medical visa consular officer should be appointed to expedite patients with serious illness seeking immediate medical treatment.
 Currently being implemented at select posts
- An efficient method to extend medical stay should be developed should further care be required.

Education Subcommittee Overview

The economic growth of the education sector in the United States and the development of international relations is highly dependent on creating a welcoming and hospitable environment for international students. If the U.S. imposes onerous security measures and entry requirements on individuals wishing to study or conduct research in the U.S., the interest of international students seeking that education would decline considerably, negatively affecting the economy. The ability of U.S. institutions of higher learning to recruit students and scholars abroad would be greatly hindered and students would be inclined to choose other countries with a less restrictive process of entry, which would result in decreased mutual understanding and influence in the international community.

Education Subcommittee Findings

Findings Related to the Department of State (DOS)

- The number of visa denials continues at a high rate and appears to be subjective, depending on the embassy personnel. Although DOS has reported that FY 2006 statistics reflect an increase in student visas being granted during Spring 06, this was only a representation of student visas. This figure does not reflect the visa denials for scholars.
- The embassies' staffing is below the demand needed to accommodate the volume of travelers
 who need their services to apply for a visa to enter the U.S. For this reason, embassy staffing
 should be continuously reviewed to ensure staffing meets the needs and required services.
- Consistent embassy procedures should be developed based on the visa application sought.
 For example, some embassies require proof that the Student of Exchange Visitor Information
 System (SEVIS) fee has been paid prior to scheduling an appointment for F, M, and J visa
 applicants. The SEVIS fee payment (resulting in a SEVIS number) is not a requirement for the
 appointment but rather for the actual interview.

• Recognizing the need to keep ineligible individuals from entering the U.S., Congress should revisit and re-evaluate the process of visa review, including Section 214(b) of the Immigration & Nationality Act. The international visa applicant must prove that they do not intend to immigrate to the U.S. This allows consular officers to have complete discretion as to whether or not to issue the visitor visa. Those discretionary denials are not subject to any effective form of administrative or legal review. Often from the U.S. consular officers' point of view, it is easier to err on the side of denying a visa if there is any doubt rather than issuing the visa. Setting a tone favorable to visa issuance unless these are specific reasons to deny, starting at the highest levels within DOS to the Chief of the Nonimmigrant Visa Unit, would be a positive first step.

Findings Related to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Customs and Border Protection (CBP)

- Unnecessary errors are made by CBP officers, i.e. printing the wrong visa statuses and the wrong
 expiration dates on I-94 cards. At best, these types of errors are increasing and are causing
 unnecessary hardship to international visitors. A realistic consequence could result in the
 perception that the visitor is an illegal overstay. This could result in the visitor's arrest, detainment,
 deportation and refusal of re-entry.
- NSEERS entry-exit process is difficult, which includes limited access to CBP officials who conduct this process. Problems include times that conflict for people who have connecting flights or limited times available for entry/exit interviews in the airport. Also, location is a problem. All NSEERS visitors must walk to Terminal E in IAH. Few CBP and airport officials are knowledgeable of its location, so they fail in directing them to the proper place, which is quite difficult to get to and from in order for visitors meet flight and a connecting flight times.

Findings Related to the Department of State and the Department of Homeland Security

- There is a major discrepancy between what the Designated School Officials (DSO), DHS and the DOS displays on the SEVIS screen. Because the DOS is limited in what they see on the SEVIS screen, comments, changes and other necessary background information related to the decisions made on students' records may be unclear, and may be perceived as inaccurate. Further, visitors often have difficulty getting a visa, or may also experience difficulties when they enter our borders at the post of entry.
- The current DHS database is not updated in an adequate and timely manner to reflect accurate immigration status. For example, when information is updated by the DSO, it often takes six months for the corrections to reach the DOS official who will deal with the international visitor. In addition, information is not getting to the employees efficiently and effectively from DOS and DHS leaders. There is a tremendous need for systemically linking the databases.
 DOS and DHS are collaborating to synchronize their systems

Education Subcommittee Recommendations

Recommendations to the Department of State

- Install a system that will rate the number of visa approvals and individual denials by embassies
 with more detailed institutional and applicant information. This will provide a clear picture of the
 trend of visa decisions made by particular embassies.
- The communication between Washington and the U.S. Embassies abroad can be improved by sending electronic cables to all employees whose daily job performance may be affected by any changes made by the DOS in Washington D.C.

- The embassies currently have approximately a six to eight week turn-around time for an interview after the appointment is confirmed. Published information states that the time is 14 days or less. There should be research into this discrepancy. Increased personnel and training should minimize this time frame as well as cut down on long lines. In addition, all embassy or consular appointments for interviews should be made available online and be consistent across-the-board.
- Expedited F and J visa, as mandated by the DOS, processing should be honored by all consulates
 and embassies, so its original intent of students and scholars not arriving late in the school year will
 not be an issue.
- Students and scholars who are maintaining F-1 or J-1 status should not be denied a visa to reenter the U.S. to continue their studies, research or teaching. Students and scholars who are
 maintaining F or J status should be allowed the ability to: a) apply for a visa interview time before
 departing the U.S. and going to a U.S. embassy or consulate, and b) gain a security clearance
 review before departing the U.S.
- Improve the visa application Form DS-156. Shift question number #27 (What is the purpose of the trip?) to become question number #1. Question number #38 on the DS-156 should be rephrased.
 The consulate should look at serious arrests, offenses or any convictions, rather than violations such as traffic tickets.

Recommendations to the Department of Homeland Security/Customs and Border Protection

- Implement a checklist for procedures at the airports to eliminate improper mistakes that occur at the airports. Prepare the international visitors for the questions that will be asked at the Port of Entry, and for the documents that the visitors will need to present. Eliminate the procedures that require international guests in the U.S. to make a personal appearance to an immigration official to correct errors that are made by CBP officers on their I-94 without penalty to the visitor and/or school or employer. Have the corrections made either via the internet or by mail.
- Designate a minimum of five special officers to work with F and J visa category visitors at each
 airport. The officers should be assigned to work for CBP, Immigration and Custom Enforcement
 (ICE) and Citizen and Immigration Services (CIS) to facilitate the F and J visa holders' needs.
 The position for these specially designated employees should offer the employee professional
 advancement. This will attract strong candidates and make the position desirable to many
 qualified candidates.
- Proper instructions, correct signage and training of CBP and airport personnel should be provided
 to assist individuals who must register with NSEERS. There should be shuttles at IAH for visitors
 to go to and from the interview. Walk-away materials on Special Registration entry-exit procedures
 should be updated with new procedures, time estimates and exact locations for the interviews.
- If a student or scholar is detained in a secondary inspection, there should be: 1) an announcement
 or communication as to who is there, and 2) a call to the school's international office, so they can
 contact the volunteer or faculty member who is awaiting the new student or scholar at the airport.
- A customer service evaluation card "Rate our Customer Service" should be given to all visitors as they exit the airport for feedback on the service they received from the airport staff. Implemented by IAH, Walt Disney, ACI, DOC

Recommendations to the Department of State and the Department of Homeland Security

- Importance should be given to the roles that DSO and Responsible Officers (RO) play with international visitors on F and J visa categories, as well as their multiple and complex responsibilities to the DHS, DOS, their institutions and the visitors. Verification of international visitors' purpose in the U.S. and/or confirmation of immigration status could be made by the DSO or RO, which would eliminate hardship to U.S. government agencies and/or the international visitor. For example, the DHS database may reflect an immigration status as invalid. However, the DSO and/or RO may have evidence that establishes lawful immigration status. This vital information could then be forwarded to the proper U.S. government agency, which in turn could prevent an inappropriate detention and/or arrest of a legitimate visitor.
- Mandatory and continuous training at every level is imperative. Training needs to include cultural enlightenment, understanding the visa process, visa categories and approvals. Training for DHS officials should:
 - provide continuous training on proper customer service which includes language and culture.
 - develop check list for staff that is updated regularly, which includes changes made by department heads.
 - create a continuous improvement employee position within each agency which will work with the various agencies in order to keep all agencies informed of new regulations and rules.
 - DHS agencies: CBP, ICE and CIS, should have quarterly meetings with the various ethnic communities, academic institutions and the various organizations that work with our international guests to streamline processes within the DHS agencies.

Summary of Results and Accomplishments

Improvements Developed by the Houston Airport System at IAH

- New FIS opened in 2005 equipped with 84 passport control booths, capable of processing 4,500 international passengers an hour.
- Special Service Representatives (SSR) hired to provide passenger assistance by staffing information booths, serving as greeters (medical & VIP), assisting with queue movement, assisting with the
- completion of necessary forms, and providing translation service (approximately 22 languages).
- Public Safety staff improving the overall efficient movement of travelers through the CBP arrival process by providing assistance to CBP officers with escorts and monitoring queue movement.
- Kiosks/booths with computers and internet connections have been placed in FIS prior to Passport Control for proper completion of CBP forms.
- IAH conducts its own survey regarding various aspects of the passenger's arrival experience and wait times in the FIS.
- Proactively educate passengers pre-departure on the expected clearance process upon arriving at IAH, ever changing entry & exit requirements which minimizes time upon arrival, reduces negative expectations and anxiety about the U.S. entry process.
- During international conferences, HAS initiates outreach to Foreign Service Officers, chambers of commerce, and industries to establish contact and provide necessary information concerning entry process for all international conference participants.
- IAH has been proactively working with CBP to assist in the facilitation of international conference
 participants with positive responses received from the Offshore Technology Conference (OTC), the
 Cambridge Energy Research Associates Conference (CERA), the International Association of Ports
 and Harbors Conference (IAPH), the U.S. Arab Economic Forum (USAEF), and the Hewlett-Packard
 Technology Conference (HP). The success of the HP conference resulted in Houston being chosen as
 the venue for the Microsoft Worldwide Partner 2008 Conference.
- Close collaboration with regional CBP office and active engagement and support of COH government and private sector to better the entry process at IAH as well as continued participation and collaboration of Mayor's Task Force on International Travelers.

Overall Improvements Developed from the Rice-Chertoff Initiative

- The University of Houston (UH) and Rice University collaborated to develop training program to educate CBP staff on business traveler habits/patterns. This is currently being reviewed and modified/edited by CBP officials with the intent to implement in the future.
- New CBP branded uniformed signage has been installed at IAH with additional signage on order.
- Eight (8) LCD screens have been installed at IAH. Two informational videos have been created to
 provide information to international travelers: 1) DHS produced video presenting CBP entry process
 information and 2) DOS/DHS in collaboration with Disney produced video welcoming visitors to the U.S.
 Houston video is currently being developed.
- The preliminary results of the DHS U.S. Welcome traveler satisfaction survey for IAH have been completed and the second phase has been initiated.
- A comprehensive breakdown of data covering seasonal variations, days of the week and hours of each
 day for passenger primary queuing wait times for the two model airports has been compiled and is
 currently posted on the CBP website.
- The DHS Traveler Redress Inquiry Program (DHS TRIP) was launched on February 21, 2007.
- DOS and DHS are pursuing the sharing of database information on a real time basis to help adjudicate visas and facilitate entry processing into the U.S. DOS and DHS are assessing the possibility of electronically sharing the information to simplify the NSEERS process.
- CBP has instituted the Primary Lookout Override (PLOR) program. Over 21,000 records have been blocked to address situations where passengers are repeatedly stopped for further inspection because their biographical information is similar or identical to the person who is the subject of the record.
- DOS re-launched its consular affairs website, www.travel.state.gov on Friday, March 16, 2007. The
 redesign enhanced accessibility to information regarding international travel, U.S. visa and passports
 application procedures and visa wait times.
- "Trusted traveler" card is currently in the legal process at DHS.
- U.S. Pass blueprints detailing newly designed booths have been provided to CBP and are currently being reviewed by CBP and IAH to assess design and compatibility with current IAH infrastructure.

Summary of Recommendations Next Steps

The Mayor's Task Force on International Travelers has attained significant accomplishments, acting on the recommendations outlined in this document. While progress has been made, HAS continues to ensure improvements in order to support the breakdown of entry barriers for international travelers to our city. Proven methods will be implemented nationally.

As noted throughout this report, the need to establish effective mechanisms that will address barriers to entry is imperative in order for Houston to remain a competitive economic power. When this city demonstrates the capability to overcome the deficiencies and challenges it is experiencing, Houston will reap a deserved windfall of new jobs and increased market share.

On the basis on this rationale, HAS continues to play a major role in coordinating efforts among all the task force contributors and offers the following consensus of recommendations to contribute to the national strategy to gain competitive advantage in the world travel and tourism market. HAS will continue to lend expertise to support these recommendations and provide the necessary resources for implementation.

By conducting periodic committee reviews with the third installation of the task force and implementing these recommendations, IAH will be fully representative of a "pilot model airport" as designated in the Rice-Chertoff Joint Vision, Pilot Model Port Concept, ultimately increasing collaboration with U.S. federal agencies (DOS, DHS, and CBP) and further enhancing the established relationships.

Recommendations and Next Steps:

- Provide stronger voice for advocating maximum DHS funding at the federal level for CBP staffing and
 equipment enhancements by pursuing 1) direct contact with DHS, 2) collaboration with Continental
 Airlines and other international carriers, the business, medical, education community and relevant
 chambers of commerce, and 3) utilization of members of the Texas Congressional Delegation for aid
 and assistance.
- Automation of I-94 forms with the objective of eventually eliminating paper forms. Newly redesigned
 I-94 paper forms have been mandated to replace the previous version to be utilized by January 31, 2008.
 However, new forms have not been distributed to all U.S. gateways and new design is not substantively different.
- Collaborate with CBP leadership to continue HAS efforts to monitor activities within the airport and
 proactively work with major corporations and institutions, as well as foreign agencies and companies
 to ensure traveling public is accurately informed of procedures and requirements.
- Implementation of suggested UH/Rice University training program for all Houston CBP officers regarding
 1) business personnel travel patterns from various regions to Houston, 2) customer service, 3) cultural
 sensitivity, and 4) professionalism.

- Encourage collaboration/consultation with private sector for implementation of hospitality education focusing on customer service, cultural sensitivity and professionalism to provide warm welcome to arriving international visitors.
- Promote education of consular officers throughout the world regarding travel patterns to the region.
 This information could be posted on a secure DOS website displaying general information on
 legitimate business activities, tourism, medical facilities and education that would be cause for travel to
 Houston and Texas. As the concept develops, detailed travel patterns from specific countries could be
 added as well as general patterns of illegal activity between Houston/Texas and specific countries.
- Continue ongoing support for synchronization of DOS and DHS information systems.
- Advocate immediate implementation of the "trusted traveler" program at IAH.
- Continuously address factors in the end-to-end process that contribute to inefficiencies in the current system to achieve fully streamlined process with specific emphasis placed on elimination of the NSEERS process.
- Address challenges new programs and infrastructure modifications present. IAH is one of the testing
 grounds for the 10 print biometric finger print identifier machines for the U.S Visit Program. Although
 this will enhance traveler identification information, it presents challenges that must be addressed in
 order for continuous successful implementation to occur, e.g., machine height requirements, disruption
 of queue movement.
- Continue efforts to address queue movement by modifying the current infrastructure to support the
 utilization of a colored lighting system in CBP booths to signal the need for: 1) escorts to secondary
 passport inspection area, 2) translation services, and 3) supervisory assistance. This would establish
 a more professional, efficient process as well as prevent the possibility of an embarrassing situation
 for the traveler.
- Implementation of multilingual "welcome" signage as well as improved directional signs to assist travelers with way finding in the Federal Inspection Services Facility (FIS).
- Continue efforts to promote full and efficient CBP staffing which does not adequately meet demand at IAH by advocating 1) increased funding to augment the number of CBP officers available during peak hours, 2) establishment of maximum wait times of 30 minutes rather than 60 minutes, 2) increase allocation of overtime in order to better match capacity with arrival demand, and 3) hiring more bilingual officers to assist in the facilitation of non-English speaking travelers.
- Reconsider the use of the in-transit lounge for passengers transiting through the U.S. rather than
 processing through the CBP formality. This would decrease the workload of CBP staff and reduce
 wait times for all remaining international passengers.