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Green Cards Would Mean Fingerprinting at Airports

By ERIC LIPTON

WASHINGTON, July 26 — The nation's estimated 12 million legal permanent residents would be subject to fingerprinting every time they re-entered the United States, under a plan the Homeland Security Department intends to announce Thursday.

The new security checks would be used at all international airports, seaports and land borders. Even before the proposal was officially announced, it drew strong opposition from some immigrant advocates who said it would send the wrong signal to people who were legally trying to become citizens.

The new security checks would expand a program called US-Visit that now covers most foreign visitors to the United States from countries except Canada and Mexico.

Since January 2004, 61 million people have been fingerprinted and digitally photographed to confirm that the visas they hold are valid and to check whether visitors have criminal records or are terrorism suspects.

The proposal to expand the program comes at a time when the Homeland Security Department has integrated computer systems operated by its Citizenship and Immigration Services unit, which maintains records including fingerprints on all legal permanent residents.

Anna Hinken, a US-Visit spokeswoman, said that requiring legal permanent residents to undergo such a check would make it possible to intercept people who were using a stolen or fraudulent legal permanent resident card, or green card, to enter the United States illegally.

It will also comply with a legal requirement that the Homeland Security Department use biometrics to confirm the validity of government-issued travel documents at the border, she said.

"This will make people safer," Ms. Hinken said, "because no one can steal their permanent resident card and pretend to be them."

The new review system, which would not be put into effect for several months, would affect an estimated one million people a year, Ms. Hinken said; that represents the approximate number of times that legal permanent residents re-enter the United States after having traveled abroad.

But some immigrant advocates said the plan was reminiscent of the effort, started after the 2001 terrorist attacks, to require Middle Eastern and South Asian men on temporary visas in the United States to register with federal authorities.

"The security measures required to become legal permanent residents in the first place are sufficient to guarantee our homeland security," said Shirley Lin, a spokeswoman for

the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund in New York. “This is an unnecessary measure that sends a wrong signal to those expressing their desire to become a full part of United States society.”

The announcement on Thursday will involve just a proposed rule, meaning there will be a 30-day comment period before the changes could become final, Ms. Hinken said.

Besides extending the requirements to legal permanent residents, officials want to start doing the reviews for some Canadian visitors, Ms. Hinken said.

The proposed system would not affect most Canadians who visit the United States as tourists or Mexicans entering the United States with a government-issued border crossing card. The requirement would just apply to some Canadians entering the United States with work visas.