

IAH Nation's First Model Port

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Houston's Bush Intercontinental Airport will serve as the nation's first model port. It's a new program of the customs and border patrol designed to make the process of arriving in America an easier one. Houston Public Radio's Laurie Johnson reports.

People waiting in line at customs usually get their first chance to ask questions or clear up misidentifications when they reach the customs agent's booth. But a new system piloted at Bush Intercontinental will streamline the process. Houston Airport System Aviation Director Rick Vacar says behind the scenes is where most of the changes are taking place with customs procedures.

"A lot of that has to do with early database work, sharing information with the Secretary of State, State Department working with the Department of Homeland Security. And a lot of what is important to make this all work is the visas are issued overseas by State Department but the actual clearing, once the visa is issued, is done here in the U.S., that's why it's important for them to work together."

This clearing process will eliminate a lot of the false-positive matches, where a traveler is misidentified as a person of interest. Under the old system, those travelers would be referred for additional inspection, but now they'll be free to go through customs.

"The U.S. is still a welcoming nation. Our borders are still open. Our challenge at CBP is doing both our facilitative role and also protecting our country."

That's U.S. Customs and Border Patrol Spokesman Jeff Baldwin. He says international travel is expected to increase by 21 percent over the next five years. So in addition to what happens behind the scenes, out front the CBP is placing multiple-language video screens, brochures and a website to answer questions for people entering the U.S.

"We're hoping by having the videos where people are standing in the queue and standing on line and being able to understand the process, that will help to speed up the process. This is not the end of it, this is really just the beginning of the phases of what we're doing. Because there are still groups meeting to see what we can do to facilitate the process."

There will also be roving Customs officers, who will walk up and down the lines answering questions and directing travelers through the process. Intercontinental is the first airport to implement the new program. Washington-Dulles will follow later this spring with CBP officials hoping to duplicate it at other international hubs in the future. Laurie Johnson, Houston Public Radio News.