

U.S. lenient on passports for air travelers during application crush

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WASHINGTON (CP) - No Canadian air travelers without passports have been turned away from flights to the United States, two months into the new security program.

The leniency will continue through the busy spring break period as U.S. attempts to grapple with a crush of requests for the document from Americans. "No one is being denied entry," Kelly Klundt, spokeswoman for U.S. Customs and Border Protection, said Thursday.

"We do have the authorization to enforce it more strictly. We are not taking that step at this point."

That won't last forever, though, said Klundt.

"There's no specific time line at this point. It's a priority to keep all that legitimate trade and travel moving. We are working through the challenges. You have to roll with the punches."

About 99 per cent of people who fly to the U.S. from Canada and Bermuda have passports, she said, so only a few hundred a week don't.

In the last week, for instance, 259 passengers out of 201,810 were without passports, according to Homeland Security Department statistics.

And while they probably faced some extra inspection, they still got on their flights.

"The goal is not to strand travelers," said Klundt. "There's a certain degree of flexibility."

Both Canada and the U.S. are getting record numbers of passport applications, creating a huge backlog.

In Canada, the wait time to get one by mail has hit about nine weeks. It's more like 10 weeks in the U.S. instead of the usual four to six.

The State Department is notifying people that even expedited service, which costs an extra US\$60, is taking at least a month.

Industry groups, who've been breathing easy until now, are closely watching the situation.

"There's a potential problem there," said Allen Kay at the U.S. Travel Industry Association.

"We are somewhat concerned. But everybody understands how important this is."

Caleb Tiller at the National Business Travel Association said short-notice travel for people could now be troublesome after a smooth start to the program with little impact on tourism.

"Now we're concerned about people who haven't got passports in advance. Everyone's waiting for the other shoe to drop."

But the biggest concern isn't the air travel requirements that went into effect Jan. 23, said Kay.

It's the rules at land and sea crossings.

"The worst part is it's ambiguous," said Kay. "It's the uncertainty."

U.S. officials appear determined to implement the passport requirement at the border by next January, even though Congress gave them until June 2009.

Canada, and many U.S. politicians, support alternatives like enhanced driver's licences for fear the plan will put a major dent in trade and tourism.