State, DHS put technology punch at borders

Government Computer News

By Wilson P. Dizard III
GCN Staff

Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice and Homeland Security secretary Michael Chertoff today unveiled a joint program to strengthen technology at the border, speed legitimate travel and bolster counterterrorism programs.

"We will update our technology to achieve a faster, more secure" method of processing travelers, Rice said in remarks at the State Department this morning.

"When I took office the [stereotype] was that the State Department was the welcoming department and a little soft, while [the Homeland Security Department] was the tough department but a little heartless," Rice said. "We share an interest in an open and fully secure border."

Rice emphasized the reduced processing times the departments have achieved for issuing visas to scientists, among other travelers.

Chertoff said that officials share "a vision for strengthening security and keeping the welcome mat out."

That strategy will involve extensive deployment of modern technology, Chertoff added.

The new policy, described as the Rice-Chertoff Joint Vision: Secure Borders and Open Doors in the Information Age, relies on three phases:

1. "Renewing America's Welcome," a project to ease the path for legitimate travelers. One aspect of this phase will be to create two pilots that will be designed to improve the experience of international travelers arriving at airports. The pilot programs at the Houston and Dulles international airports will include customized video messages, as well as improved screening of arriving passengers. State also plans to pilot videoconferencing technology so that foreigners seeking visas won't have to travel long distances to embassies or consulates.

2. A second phase calls for "Travel Documents for the 21st Century," and builds partly on existing programs. For example, it includes both the existing e-passport program that relies on contactless chip technology and a new generation of border crossing cards that also will use radio-frequency identification devices. By the end of this year, State and DHS plan to produce an inexpensive, secure biometric passport card for Americans who cross the border frequently, the departments said. Citizens will be required to present the cards at the borders by 2008 under existing law, a senior official said. They will be called the People Access

Security Service.

3. The third and final phase of the program is "Smarter Screening," which relies largely on improved information sharing between the two departments. State and DHS plan to eventually move to a paperless visa system in which officials will have electronic access to visas, passports and biometric information. The departments also seek to share data with like-minded governments.

Officials said the push to bolster border technology would not involve imposing any new requirements on foreigners traveling to the United States, and in some cases would be accompanied by more flexible visa requirements for students and business professionals.

Senior department officials speaking on condition of anonymity said they seek to develop standards that will allow various existing registered traveler system and border card programs to use interoperable technology, including RFID chips.

One aspect of the technology push that falls under the travel document phase is the planned creation of a global enrollment network for travel document applications. The goal of this project would be to capture a traveler's data once and use it many times. Officials said they are still in the planning stages of developing specifications for the network.