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First Model Port

Houston employs customer-centric techniques to earn CBP designation

As Department of Commerce projections call for a record number of international travelers to the United States in 2007, the Houston Airport System can rest assured its foreign visitors will be well accommodated as they enter U.S. territory at George Bush Intercontinental Airport (IAH).

Just in time to break the historical capacity records set in 2000, IAH has been designated as the nation's first model port under the jurisdiction of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP). Yearlong efforts to establish products and processes to make international travel into the United States more welcoming have officially commenced at the largest federal inspection service (FIS) station in the country.

"After September 11, 2001, we had a significant problem with arrival delays for foreign visitors here in Houston largely due to the relocation of some of the customs and immigration personnel," said Houston Airport System Director of Aviation Rick Vacar, noting substantial staffing had been moved to the Port of Houston and the Texas-Mexico border. "That caused a staffing shortage with some international visitors being delayed up to six hours in our customs hall. Obviously, that was not acceptable to us."

HAS addressed the situation with local CBP authorities as well as leadership in Washington, voicing the quandary of staffing insufficiencies and the negative impact derived from the increased scrutiny of foreign visitors in general.

"The main impact here at Houston was substantial fall off in foreign visitors to the Texas Medical Center – the largest medical center in the world," Vacar said. "We also had substantial impacts in the academic community for undergraduate and graduate programs for not only foreign studies, but exchange programs and the like. The other part was a general hit on tourism because it was more difficult to get to the States."

The combination of these elements led to decreased tourism estimated to top \$17 billion nationally in lost revenue. Eventually, this problem was addressed with the model port initiative led by Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. The program focuses on improvements to the process encountered by visitors when they arrive in the United States.

"Working with CBP, we ended up putting a number of initiatives in place mostly dealing with information flows to foreign visitors," Vacar said. "When visitors arrive into the facility, we have special service representatives roving in the queues to make sure paperwork is filled out properly and alleviating delays when they reach the passport control officer."

Vacar said IAH has traditionally maintained a group of international arrivals service representatives fluent in a total of 28 languages, and now the CBP shares responsibility for such staffing. Eight to 10 multilingual representatives can

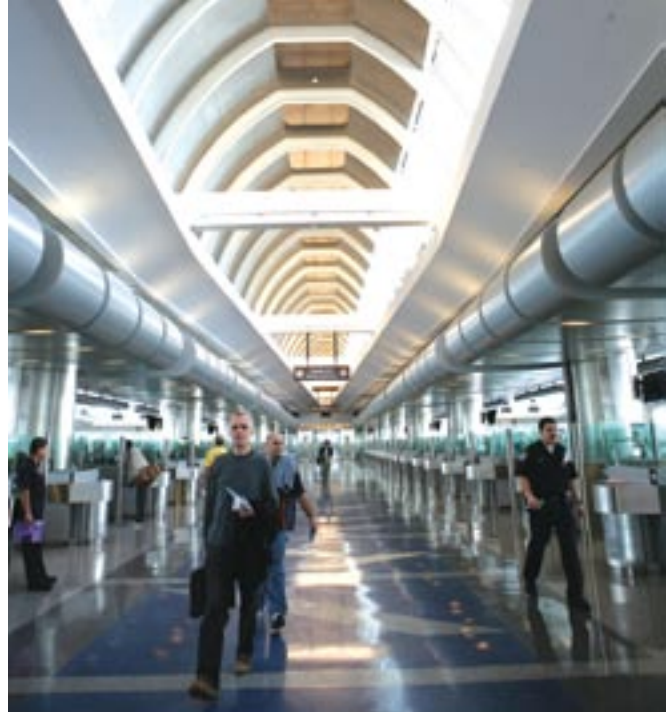
Model Port

be found in the customs hall at any given time. There is also directional signage in multiple languages as well as a video narrated in Spanish, French, German and English that explains the customs process in detail while visitors are waiting. A "Welcome to the U.S." brochure also alleviates confusion.

The responsibility of being "Houston Friendly" also falls upon CBP personnel.

"The U.S. had a reputation for CBP personnel being unfriendly, so we instituted a 'Houston Friendly' initiative," Vacar said, referring to sensitivity training the CBP now mandates for its officers as HAS does for all badged airport employees. "The program is called 'Houston Friendly' and it includes a video that shows employees how to interact with other people here."

All of these elements helped IAH meet criteria to become first model port, a designation the airport achieved in April. Washington-Dulles International Airport is replicating IAH's model port measures and will also serve as a prototype for international airport operations around the country.



■ 'Houston Friendly' sensitivity training is mandated for CBP officers as well as all badged IAH employees.

MULTILINGUAL SIGNAGE

Vacar said the model port requirement of multilingual signage has been a standard element at IAH for more than 10 years due to the airport's large Latin American clientele. This signage effort was expanded upon in the airport's pilot to become a model port.

Daktronics supplied IAH with 80 LCD displays that hang over customs agent counters to support messaging in multiple languages. Spanish is the most frequently utilized.

"In Houston, we were able to support language changes with our stand alone system," said Daktronics Aviation Market Manager DeWayne Anderson. "We networked our displays together with one of our PC-based control systems so the CBP can control the displays if they want to. Agents can also select one of 32 standardized messages to be displayed with a localized control panel that sits on the counter including, 'Visitors Wait Behind Yellow Line.'"

When it comes to customs and clearing areas, Anderson said North American airports recognize the need to support international guests with multilingual message placement on electronic displays. Daktronics has supported bilingual capabilities in French and English at Montréal's Pierre Elliott Trudeau International Airport and is now installing a large video wall display in Vancouver International Airport's customs hall.

"Germanic languages are easy to accommodate with established, true type fonts built into our command set," Anderson said. "If a FIDS integrator connects our displays



Multilingual capabilities, including this Daktronics large video wall installation at Vancouver International Airport, are becoming more commonplace as airports recognize the need to support international guests. Daktronics supplied IAH with 80 LCD displays to support messaging in multiple languages.

with their server system, they can basically select those character sets to display on the screen."

Anderson said a typical Greek alphabet character will be 7 pixels high by 5 pixels wide. Alternatively, symbol-based languages require 24 pixels by 24 pixels in order to create a good representation or readable image, demanding larger display matrixes to accomplish the desired goal.

Vancouver International Airport is employing Daktronics to install a large video wall display in their customs hall that will display the more difficult Chinese, Korean and Japanese language sets.

"Vancouver wants to provide multilingual capability to their East Asian travelers," Anderson said. "They create images in an XML language, which is a web-based appearance similar to a laptop LCD panel, and project that onto our large video wall display through interface equipment that will take a VGA signal and pixelize it to the matrix size we are providing them."