



Homeland
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Press Release

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DHS ENDS ORAL DECLARATIONS AT BORDERS, REMINDS TRAVELERS OF NEW PROCEDURES ON JANUARY 31

WASHINGTON – The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) reminds travelers that beginning January 31, 2008, border crossers will be asked to present documents denoting citizenship and identity when entering the United States through land and sea ports of entry. This change primarily affects United States and Canadian citizens, who have previously been permitted entry by oral declaration alone, and marks the transition toward standard and consistent documents for all travelers entering the country. It is also the start of a more robust and concerted public education campaign, intended to inform travelers of document requirements which will be implemented next year.

“For the safety of the American people, the United States cannot have an honor system at the border,” said Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff. “Requiring secure and reliable documentation at our borders will drastically reduce security vulnerabilities posed by permitting entry based on oral declarations alone. As travelers become accustomed to carrying documents to cross the border, and as we move to more stringent documentation requirements, our border officers will be able to more quickly and confidently identify cross-border travelers.”

Beginning Jan. 31 of this year, U.S. and Canadian citizens ages 19 and older should no longer expect that an oral declaration alone will be sufficient to prove identity and citizenship for entry into the country. Instead, travelers will be asked to present documentation from a specified list of acceptable documents when entering the U.S. at land and sea ports of entry. Examples include birth certificates and driver’s licenses. A complete list of acceptable documents is available to travelers at ports of entry and is also available at www.cbp.gov. Travelers who do not present one of these documents may be delayed while U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers attempt to verify their identity and citizenship. Children ages 18 and under will only need to present a birth certificate.

In order to further secure our borders against illegal entry, the U.S. will no longer be able to admit travelers based on nothing more than a person’s oral assertion of citizenship. During October to December 2007 alone, CBP officers reported 1,517 cases of individuals falsely claiming to be U.S. citizens. Last month, CBP officials determined that an individual falsely

claiming to be a U.S. citizen was wanted for homicide in California. This individual was paroled for entry into the U.S. and transported into the custody of the San Diego Sheriff's Department. Separately, multiple Government Accountability Office and Inspector General reports have highlighted weaknesses associated with oral declarations and substandard documentation.

Standard and consistent documentation is critical for border officials to accurately determine admissibility into the United States. The Jan. 31 change is a step forward from the largely subjective standard that allowed travelers to present an almost limitless array of documents, such as baptismal certificates, to satisfy CBP officers of their citizenship. This change will allow frontline officers to standardize inspections against a narrower class of documents, and CBP has protocols in place to verify the authenticity of suspicious driver licenses and guard against the use of counterfeit or altered licenses.

DHS has maintained a consistent public awareness and information campaign to ensure that the traveling public is aware of the new travel documentation requirements under the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI). The transition beginning Jan. 31 will allow travelers to become accustomed to the need to present appropriate documents. Travelers who apply for a passport card, passport, Trusted Traveler Program cards, or other secure documentation denoting both citizenship and identity in response to the Jan. 31 change will *not* need to take additional steps to meet the final WHTI requirements upon full implementation in June 2009.

U.S. citizens may begin applying in advance for the new U.S. Passport Card on Feb. 1, 2008, in anticipation of land border travel document requirements. The U.S. Department of State expects that cards will be available and mailed to applicants in spring 2008.

Although DHS was on schedule to begin implementation of the new requirements as early as summer 2008, the fiscal year 2008 Appropriations Bill passed by Congress last month restricts the department from implementing these new requirements until June 2009.

For more information, visit www.dhs.gov or www.travel.state.gov.

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