Best Operational Success – Winner

Entry/Exit Team
U.S. Customs and Border Protection

DHS/Customs and Border Protection (CBP) has a complex, multifaceted mission to manage and secure the border from criminal and terrorist threats while facilitating legitimate travel and trade and ensuring the vitality of the U.S. economy.

In 2013, CBP received the long-standing security mandate to biometrically record the entry and exit of foreign nationals from the United States at air, land, and sea ports of entry. While US Visitor and Immigration Status Indication Technology successfully implemented biometric entry at airports beginning in 2004, the biometric exit mandate has been a major challenge, given that airports were not built with the infrastructure to manage departure control; domestic and international flights are commingled; and it would take considerable resources to staff every exit location. In addition, the air travel industry regarded biometric exit as a government mandate, emphasizing that airlines and airports should not bear the cost. Years of testing have demonstrated that biometric facial comparison technology is the most secure, efficient, and cost-effective way to fulfill the congressional mandate while protecting the privacy of all travelers. Everyone knows how to take a photo, and it is a simple and efficient process.

Beyond just meeting the biometric exit mandate, CBP's leadership had a vision to innovate the entire travel journey through face recognition. The air travel industry had started to develop its own modernization plans that aligned with CBP's use of biometric technology. Eventually, it opened the opportunity to develop public/private partnerships and achieve a mutual goal: a more secure and efficient identity verification process without the need to handle paper documents, thereby enhancing the customer experience. CBP built the Traveler Verification Service as the back-end system to do facial biometric matching, while the air travel partners bought the front-end, consumer-facing facial comparison technology. CBP can now offer its stakeholders "identity as a service" wherever an identity check is required in the travel process, including check-in, bag drop, Transportation Security Administration screening, and departure, to further secure and streamline the travel process.

CBP has demonstrated the operational success of its vision with its ongoing Entry/Exit deployments. Currently, through public-private partnerships, CBP has implemented facial comparison technology for international arrivals at 18 airports and for international departures at 27 airports. CBP has also implemented biometric facial comparison technology for pedestrian crossings at 14 locations on the southwest border and at seven locations for closed-loop cruises. CBP has processed more than 50 million travelers through facial biometrics at air, land, and sea ports of entry. Since September 2018, CBP has used biometric facial recognition technology to capture more than 270 imposters who attempted to enter the United States using a genuine travel document that belongs to another person.

With the devastating impacts of COVID-19 on all modes of travel, CBP's vision of a seamless travel process using facial biometrics has another critical benefit – it provides travelers with a hygienic, touchless process that will help rebuild the public's confidence to travel again. As CBP continues to support the travel recovery efforts, the Entry/Exit team will work closely with its stakeholders to develop the future of seamless, touchless travel.