



U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

WRITTEN TESTIMONY

OF

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FOR A HEARING ON

**“CYBER SIDE-EFFECTS: HOW SECURE IS THE PERSONAL
INFORMATION ENTERED INTO THE FLAWED HEALTHCARE.GOV?”**

BEFORE
THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

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INTRODUCTION

Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Thompson, and Members of the Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to discuss our shared goals of supporting government agencies to ensure that only authorized applicants receive public benefits. My name is Soraya Correa, Associate Director for the Enterprise Services Directorate. I am responsible for overseeing verification programs at U. S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 (ACA) limits eligibility to enroll in a qualified health plan through the state and federal exchanges established under the ACA to citizens, nationals, or those otherwise “lawfully present” in the United States. The law directs the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to check applicant eligibility against Department of Homeland Security (DHS) data if the applicant does not attest that he or she is a U.S. Citizen, or if the Social Security Administration (SSA) cannot verify the applicant’s claim of U.S. Citizenship. The Systematic Alien Verification for Entitlements (SAVE) Program¹ responds to queries and provides HHS, through the “Hub” established by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, with immigration status information as well as information regarding naturalized and derived citizens on behalf of DHS.

SAVE Access and Verification Process

Before accessing SAVE, user agencies must sign a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) or a Computer Matching Agreement (CMA) with USCIS that details the terms and conditions of their use of SAVE. The SAVE verification process requires up to three steps: 1) Initial Verification, 2) Additional Verification, and 3) Third Step Verification. For initial verification, a user agency submits a status verification request and the system provides the applicant’s immigration status information. If SAVE is not able to verify an individual’s immigration status on initial verification, the benefit granting agency is prompted to submit the query to the additional verification step.

During additional verification, a user agency may also submit additional information, such as a maiden name or additional immigration document numbers, to USCIS using the SAVE system. SAVE response time for additional verification, which includes manual review of available databases, ranges from 3-5 federal working days. If SAVE is not able to verify an individual’s immigration status at this stage, the agency is prompted to submit the query for third step verification. The user agency must forward a completed Document Verification Request form, with legible photocopies of both sides of the applicant’s immigration documentation to USCIS for third step verification. Registered agencies may submit this information electronically or manually. SAVE response times for third step verification is generally 10-20 federal working days. If immigration status still cannot be confirmed, benefit-granting agencies may refer applicants to a local USCIS office to correct or update their record.

¹ SAVE is a service that helps federal, state and local benefit-issuing agencies, institutions, and licensing agencies determine the immigration status of benefit applicants so only those applicants entitled to benefits receive them. SAVE does not determine whether applicants are eligible for a specific benefit or license; the benefit-granting agency makes that determination. SAVE uses an online system that checks a benefit applicant’s immigration status information against over 100 million federal records. Agencies that do not have access to an automated system may submit a paper verification request. SAVE is available in all 50 states. It has been providing immigration status information to public benefit granting agencies for over 25 years. SAVE has more than 1,060 customer agencies, including the Social Security Administration and most state departments of motor vehicles. The SAVE Program received over 14 million verification requests in fiscal year 2013.

PREPARATIONS FOR ACA

USCIS and HHS entered into a CMA to authorize HHS to use the SAVE program for ACA verification. In preparation for the ACA open enrollment period, USCIS and HHS tested the web services connection between SAVE and the HHS “Hub” that the Exchanges uses to submit queries to SAVE and other partner agencies. The testing included checks on both case-specific queries and overall functionality.

After all testing was successfully completed in the weeks leading up to open enrollment, HHS was granted access to SAVE to meet the October 1 ACA exchanges implementation date. As of November 10, 2013, there have been 91,011 Hub-generated initial queries with an average of 1.31 seconds for initial electronic SAVE responses. It is important to note that this figure is not a proxy for the number of individuals about whom HHS has submitted queries to SAVE because there are often multiple SAVE queries per applicant. Moreover, this figure is not a proxy for the number of people who have applied for health care coverage under the ACA because only a small percentage of such applications require the submission of queries to SAVE. SAVE is responding to all properly submitted queries.

Program Enhancements

To help facilitate immigration status verification for HHS and other agencies under the ACA, USCIS designated more than 30 additional staff to ACA cases and has introduced several program enhancements. Authorized agencies may now receive grant date and sponsorship information for select statuses on initial, second, and third step verification. Previously, agencies had to submit multiple forms to determine when an applicant was granted status, and sponsorship information was not available on initial verification.

USCIS also recently introduced an “auto second step” feature, which allows SAVE to automatically send cases to additional verification if the initial step requests additional verification. This enhancement decreases agency user burden, ensures that additional verification cases are referred to the second step, and makes the case resolution process more efficient. Additionally, in April 2013, the SAVE Program launched a scan and upload feature that enables agencies to electronically attach scanned copies of immigration documents to cases. Cases with a scanned copy of the immigration document do not require submission of a paper form.

CONCLUSION

Since the inception of the SAVE Program, USCIS has provided benefit-granting government agencies a reliable method to verify an applicant’s immigration status to ensure that only authorized applicants receive public benefits. On behalf of all of my colleagues at USCIS, I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to you today about the SAVE program.