

Congress Reopens Debate On National ID Card

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Brian Krebs, Newsbytes. With popular support for a national identification system gaining ground in the wake of Sept. 11, Congress once again is being forced to debate an idea it has entertained and rejected numerous times over the years.

At a House Government Reform subcommittee hearing on the matter today, Ranking Democrat Janice Schakowsky, Ill., said Sept. 11 demonstrated that a national ID system would not have stopped the terrorist attacks.

"The events of Sept. 11 show us that systems like national identification cards will not deter the crazed terrorist from his or her mission," she said. Indeed, the majority of the 19 known terrorists that took part in the attacks were in the United States legally at least according to their documents.

Yet several veteran lawmakers who were active when Congress last visited the issue say now is the time to seize the moment as an opportunity to strengthen the nation's existing forms of ID, particularly given that several of the hijackers appear to have obtained entry into the country using forged documents.

To that end, former Senate Majority Whip Alan Simpson told Congress to scrap the idea of a national ID. Instead, Simpson said states and the federal government should standardize and strengthen the most common forms of ID including birth certificates, drivers' licenses, Social Security cards, and to make them more tamper-resistant and counterfeit-proof.

Simpson noted, however, that Congress has been rebuffed on at least four prior occasions when it tried to add biometric elements - such as fingerprints to existing forms of ID, by civil liberties groups who compared the idea to the branding of concentration camp victims in World War II.

"Every time we try to do something in this area, it's filled with emotion, fear, guilt, and racism," Simpson told the subcommittee today. "You have to do something, and that something is not any more intrusive than what you get when you go into the (grocery) store and slide your (discount) card."

Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich concurred, and said Congress should pass a resolution

urging states to add biometric identifiers to their drivers' licenses, and to make that data available to law enforcement agencies at the state and federal level.

When asked how such a system would differ from a national ID, Gingrich said implementing the changes at the state level would be far less alarming to the average citizen than implementing the system via federal government fiat.

"Most people are comfortable going to the local DMV to get their driver's license," Gingrich said. "This would be highly decentralized and controlled by the states, and would minimize civil liberties concerns."

Gingrich urged the federal government to issue biometric-encoded IDs to all legal immigrants, and to keep tabs on their movements using an enhanced database operated by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS).

Civil liberties groups, however, remain uneasy with the notion of a national identifier, and worry that such a system would simply provide a new tool for racial and ethnic profiling.

Katie Corrigan, legislative counsel to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), said a national identifier would create a false sense of security and divert valuable resources away from other more effective counter-terrorism efforts.

"At best, a national ID would serve as a placebo to make us all feel better when we show the card at the airport, a turnpike booth, or at our workplaces," Corrigan said.

Jonathan Turley, a professor of public interest law at George Washington University, said through the myriad databases at state DMV offices and records based on consumers' Social Security numbers, the United States already has a national identification system.

"The only question is whether we should create a more integrated and uniform system," he said.

Turley told the subcommittee that there is a compelling basis for establishing a biometric ID card system for certain groups, such as foreign nationals, hazardous waste truckers, and researchers with access to materials such as anthrax, for example.

"There is an increasing need for a more reliable form of identification," Turley said. "If Congress again remains passive, the market and governmental agencies will respond in their own way to this need."

Still, Turley said Congress should act deliberately and recommended the creation of a blue ribbon commission to study the privacy and security concerns of such a system.

Most in attendance at today's hearing agreed that none of the scenarios being discussed would work unless federal law enforcement agencies begin sharing information with one another about individuals who represent a potential national security threat.

As "Director of Homeland Security," former Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge has been tapped as the Bush administration's point man for increasing cooperation between the government's various intelligence agencies, including the FBI, the INS and the Central Intelligence Agency.

Simpson said he was pleased that Ridge has been asked to help those agencies get beyond their "absolute stubbornness to share information."

"I think that's what I hear the president saying, that he's going to give Ridge the authority to do that," Simpson said. "Well, we've all been here a long while, so Merry Christmas, Tom, we'll see what happens."

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