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Hawai'i Airport Introduces Biometric System for Arrivals

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— *Categories: Human Rights*

The Hawai'i Department of Transportation (HDOT) has introduced a new biometric passenger processing system at Daniel K. Inouye International Airport in Honolulu, raising questions about privacy and civil liberties alongside promises of efficiency.

The Enhanced Passenger Processing (EPP) system, launched in partnership with U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), began operations on August 19, 2025. The technology automatically photographs U.S. citizens as they approach CBP officers upon reentry from abroad. The images are then matched with existing federal databases to confirm identity and eligibility.

Officials argue the system improves processing speeds by reducing manual checks. According to HDOT, other airports that adopted the technology have seen clearance times shortened by up to 74 percent. Honolulu now joins 14 other U.S. airports—including Los Angeles, Dallas Fort Worth, and New York's JFK—where biometric entry is in use.

Supporters say the program will strengthen Honolulu's role as a Pacific gateway while easing congestion and creating a smoother experience for millions of travelers. Hawai'i relies heavily on international tourism, and state officials have promoted the system as part of a modernization strategy that includes expanded digital services and partnerships with Japan and Korea.

Yet civil liberties advocates caution that biometric systems carry risks that go beyond convenience. Privacy groups have repeatedly raised concerns about government use of

facial recognition, warning that such tools can enable mass surveillance, data misuse, or biased outcomes if not carefully regulated.

“Once biometric data is collected, individuals have very limited control over how it may be stored, shared, or used in the future,” said a representative from a U.S.-based digital rights organization, responding to the Honolulu rollout.

Participation in Honolulu’s program is automatic for U.S. citizens arriving on selected flights, although CBP states that travelers may opt out and request manual processing. Critics, however, argue that the “opt out” option is not well-publicized and may not be clearly understood by passengers in high-pressure travel settings.

The debate reflects broader tensions between national security, efficiency, and individual rights. Proponents view the system as a step forward in modernizing border control, while opponents warn that convenience should not outweigh the need for strong safeguards.

As biometric technology becomes increasingly common at U.S. entry points, Honolulu’s adoption highlights both the promise and the controversy of using digital tools in public spaces. For Hawai’i, the challenge will be balancing its reputation for hospitality with growing calls to protect travelers’ fundamental rights to privacy and informed consent.