

The International Organization for Migration's Document Examination Support Center (DESC)

IOM has long recognized the importance of travel documents and the critical role of immigration and border control officials in handling such documentation at key stages of the migration process. The appropriate use of valid travel documents and the presence of capable border control officials who have been fully trained in document examination constitute the cornerstone of safe and orderly migration. However, all too often, border control officials—many of whom work under intense pressure and with limited resources and/or capacity—are unable to properly verify the authenticity of travel documents. In recognizing the existing need for direct assistance to such officials in document examination, IOM established the Document Examination Support Center (DESC).

VISION

“To contribute to the prevention of irregular migration and the suppression of transnational organized crime through direct support to immigration and border control officials and issuing authorities in travel document examination and verification.”

Created in February 2012 and based in Bangkok, Thailand, DESC aims to provide guidance, advice and support to immigration and border control officials as well as travel document issuing authorities when suspicious documents are intercepted and further information is required to determine if the documents are legitimate. Through the operation of DESC, IOM hopes to collect and analyze pertinent data to uncover new trends in migration, as well as document fraud, in order to assist governments and development partners alike to prevent irregular migration and combat transnational crime more effectively.

Border Security: The Relationship between Border Control Officials and Travel Documents

Travel documents, which verify a person's identity and nationality (such as passports and identity cards), are tools that enable individuals to exercise their right to freedom of movement and residence within a state's borders, as well as the right to leave any state, including their own, and to return to it. A genuine travel document is the single most important instrument facilitating an individual's movement and provides unique information about his/her identity and whether s/he meets the eligibility criteria to enter or leave a particular country.

Immigration and border control officials, as a country's gatekeepers, directly handle travel documents on a daily basis. These documents are used to identify and process individuals at border crossings and through automated border checkpoint systems. In addition, travel documents serve as the basis for the issuance of visas and permits and help determine an individual's eligibility for special programs and authorizations. The decision of border control and immigration officials to allow or refuse an individual entry or exit to/from a country is primarily based on the examination of travel documents.

Challenges Faced by Frontline Officials

While many immigration and border control officials have completed formal courses in document examination and verification, additional, on-the-job training is required for them to apply, in practice, the theoretical knowledge obtained in the classroom, particularly given the ever-changing trends in migration and numerous methods employed in document fraud. Immigration and border control officials may simply suspect a travel document is “not right” or feel it is not authentic; however, they often lack the tools and knowledge to substantiate this suspicion with the proof necessary to bar the individual presenting the document from onward travel. This challenge is exacerbated by the tremendous pressure and time constraints under which border control officials operate and their limited access to adequate reference sources, equipment and secondary lines of support in document examination.

So, what happens when travel documents are forged or used by individuals who are not their rightful owners? What if immigration and border control officials are unable to detect the unlawful use of travel documents? A likely and potentially dangerous scenario emerges: without access to timely and adequate means to verify travel documentation, officials may decide to permit an individual to cross the border, when s/he should, in fact, have been stopped. A weakness in the capacity of frontline immigration and border control officials to examine and verify travel documents poses a major risk to national security and further contributes to unsafe and irregular migration, alongside transnational organized crime. DESC was established to address this issue and minimize such risks by providing a reliable, easily accessible point of contact through which immigration and border control officials may receive guidance and advice on suspicious travel documents.



DESC: A “One-Stop Shop” for Travel Document Verification

DESC is truly a “one-stop shop” for travel document verification and is designed for use by frontline immigration and border control officials and travel document issuing authorities. The DESC motto is **“We Are Here to Help You”** and the direct support provided by DESC to border officials attests to this.

DESC serves as a single point of contact for immigration and border control officials from multiple countries to access key information related to document verification. As a “one-stop shop” DESC facilitates data collection and information-sharing to enable more efficient and effective document examination among frontline immigration and border control officials.

Scope of Work

The extent to which DESC is able to support officials requesting assistance with document verification is dependent on two crucial factors over which DESC has little control, namely: (i) the quality of the information provided by official(s) concerning the travel document; and (ii) the level of technical expertise available to official(s) to utilize information shared by DESC. Unless officials have the means to post the original travel document to DESC for examination, DESC will only be capable of offering remote assistance based solely on the information received from the requesting border control official(s). DESC seeks to guide officials through the decision-making process, yet the responsibility for the final decision as to the document’s authenticity ultimately rests with the border control official(s).

Partners

DESC strives to work in close cooperation with travel document issuing authorities. To help protect the privacy and personal data of citizens and visa applicants, cooperation agreements will be signed between DESC and a number of issuing authorities in the Asia-Pacific region.

Contacting DESC

When immigration and border control officials have a question about a travel document or visa, they may contact DESC by email, phone, fax or post. DESC will consult available resources and provide the requesting official(s) with necessary information to determine whether the document in question is genuine. Support from DESC is available in a number of languages, in addition to English.



Tools Available at DESC

- Document Examination Equipment
- Specimens of Genuine Documents
- Reference Sources
- Expertise in Document Examination

Canada



IOM International Organization for Migration

DESC was established with the generous financial support of the Government of Canada.

Contact Us

Document Examination Support Center (DESC)

Immigration and Border Management Unit | International Organization for Migration (IOM)

Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific | Rajanakarn Building, 18th Floor, 183 South Sathorn Road, Bangkok 10120, Thailand

Tel: +66.2.343.9449 | Fax: +66.2.343.9450 | Email: desc@iom.int

Operating Hours

Monday through Friday (excluding holidays) from 8:00 to 17:00 hrs. Bangkok time.