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Air travellers to U.S. warned passport will soon be needed

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REGINA -- Get your passport ready.

A new, but long-expected, American law will make it mandatory for Canadians flying into the United States to carry a passport as of Jan. 23.

"We've been expecting it for well over a year and talking about it for that long," said Rita Milenkovic, president and CEO of The Travel Gallery, a Regina travel agency.

"So it's almost anticlimactic for us right now. It's coming, but this is no surprise for us or to our customers." Both Milenkovic and Steve Burchi, the vice-president of operations for the Regina Airport Authority, said now that the announcement has been made, the key is to educate the public about the need to possess a passport.

"From a communications perspective, we think it's important this message gets out because we don't want any of our clients or guests or customers being denied access to the United States on Jan. 23," said Burchi. "But, really, it's an air carrier and travel agent's responsibility to make sure that everyone that's planning to travel to the U.S. after Jan. 23 has the proper documentation."

For the time being, Canadians can continue to enter the United States with a birth certificate and driver's licence.

Passport Canada, as of last week, had received 2,017,276 passport applications this year -- an almost 11 per cent increase from this time last year.

It's the peak time of year for applications and with the announcement from the U.S., the numbers are expected to increase.

"So far we're meeting all of our delivery standards, so people are getting their passports on time. That's our priority -- to make sure that people are getting a secure passport on time," said Passport Canada spokesperson Francine Charbonneau.

"It has led to lineups, but we would never jeopardize passport security in the name of speediness." Milenkovic said she imagines some people will be unprepared for the Jan. 23 switch, but other than that she doesn't expect any problems or issues to arise.

Most people, she said, will simply comply with the new regulations.

"Leisure travel is so buoyant right now. People are spending a lot of money on holidays and I think this is just another step in the overall security and what we have come to expect when we travel. I think for the most part, if people are aware, they're just going to get this done," said Milenkovic.

The new regulations are the first phase of the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative.

The second phase will make passports a mandatory possession for Canadians entering the United States by land or sea in addition to air.

The U.S. government has approved a delay of the second phase that could see its implementation pushed back as far as June 1, 2009.

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