

Immigrant Screen Eased BY:By Mae M. Cheng. STAFF WRITER

The federal government today will end a year-old program that required male visitors from 25 foreign countries to register annually, a practice that immigrant groups called discriminatory.

Department of Homeland Security officials said that while the registration program has "proven valuable" in tracking visitors to the United States, a new system, using digital photography and fingerprinting, will be rolled out Jan. 5 that will be more effective.

When the new system is fully implemented by 2006, it will be able to collect arrival, departure and other information on most visitors to the United States, officials said. "The idea is to target individuals of concern and not to target groups of people," Bill Strassberger, a department spokesman, said yesterday.

Under the registration program that began in November 2002, male visitors from 25 foreign countries - almost all with large Arab or Muslim populations - had been required to report to immigration officials annually or face arrest or deportation. The program was started by the Justice Department after Sept. 11 and was inherited by Homeland Security when the agency took over the Immigration and Naturalization Service in March. As of the end of September, 83,519 foreign visitors had registered. Of those, nearly 13,800 were put in proceedings that could lead to deportation because of their undocumented immigrant status.

Immigrant advocates had argued that many who were put in deportation proceedings were on their way to legalizing their status and would eventually have done so were it not for the registration program that brought them to the government's attention.

But despite the program's end, those facing deportation must still go forward with their cases, officials said.

"There should be something that can give them the proper relief to stay here and work here and be with their families," said Bobby Khan, head of the Coney Island Avenue Project, a nonprofit immigrant advocacy group.

Others agreed that the announcement was a positive step but remnants of the program remain problematic. "It's a little bit of a break in the clouds in the storm that the newcomer community has been experiencing since Sept. 11, but we're far from a sunny day," said Angela Kelley, deputy director for the National Immigration Forum, a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group.

1) Newsday File Photo - Armed and ready Emergency Service Unit officer stands guard near Rockefeller Center Christmas tree. 2) Councilman Peter Vallone Jr. 3) Mayor Bloomberg. Newsday Chart / Justin Gilbert - It Doesn't Add Up (see end of text)

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