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## 10/19/2009 Truck Driver Pre-Screening Program Reality After Seven Years

By Oliver B. Patton, Washington Editor

In August 2002, a group of truck safety professionals went to the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration with a suggestion. Safety could be improved, they said, by letting employers check a key federal database for a driver applicant's crash and roadside inspection history.

It took seven years of persistent effort, and an Act of Congress, but now the agency is moving ahead with a Driver Pre-Employment Screening Program.

On October 7, Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood announced plans to give carriers access to portions of the Motor Carrier Management Information System - the data base that

police and roadside inspectors use to check on drivers and carriers. The program is scheduled to begin in December.

"This new initiative will help trucking companies ensure the safest drivers are behind the wheel of commercial trucks and buses," LaHood said in a statement. "Making this information more transparent will make our roads and highways safer for everyone."

Under the program, a third-party contractor, National Information Consortium Technologies, will extract reports on driver performance in crashes and roadside inspections from the data base, said Dave Osiecki, vice president of safety, security and operations at American Trucking Associations.

Details have not been released but Osiecki and others confirmed that carrier participation will be voluntary, and the driver will have to sign a release to permit the search. Drivers will be able to confirm their records, and correct them if necessary. Carriers will have to register and pay a fee.

**Waiting for details**

It also is not clear at this point exactly how the program will work.

"How do I get it, how quickly can I get it, what's it going to cost - those are questions still unanswered," said Kent Ferguson, Director of Transportation Solutions for the employee screening company HireRight. HireRight was formerly known in the industry as DAC Services.

Osiecki and Rob Abbott, Vice President of Safety for TransForce, a driver staffing company, were among the industry representatives at the 2002 meeting. A DAC representative was there, as well.

"This is a fantastic thing," Abbott said. Carriers have long been able to track the performance of drivers they already employ but until now there has been no way to get key performance data on a driver applying for a job.

Right now many carriers verify a driver applicant's performance by looking at state motor vehicle department records, which show traffic convictions and the like, but those lists do not provide the kind of detail that is available in the MCMIS data base.

Osiecki said MCMIS includes information gathered at roadside inspections, such as logbook and hours of service violations, as well as crash data. "It's the kind of stuff carriers don't get from previous employers," he said.

"Carriers will learn why a driver is no longer employed by his past three or four employers," Abbott said. "We know through research that crashes are caused primarily by driver actions, and reviewing this data and acting on it is critical. This is something we've been asking for for many, many years."

### **Long wait**

After presenting the idea to FMCSA, the industry went to Capitol Hill for support and got Congress to include in the 2005 highway bill a provision directing the safety agency to put the program in place.

Former FMCSA administrator John Hill said he was a strong supporter of the program during his tenure when he was at the agency.

"Carriers said to me, look you've got to provide something for us to know what kind of driver we're hiring," Hill said.

He predicted that even though the program will be voluntary, it will quickly become standard practice. "It will become the standard of care in pretty short order," he said. "What'll happen is, after a few episodes (in which agency) auditors ask carriers why they aren't using the (program) pretty soon it will become the de facto driver qualification verification."

"This is a step forward," Osiecki said. "I've been calling this opportunity a real potential benefit for safety. It's another tool that carriers have not had access to previously. If carriers take advantage of it they will see a more complete safety picture of each person that's been in the industry."

### **Fleet reactions**

Fleet safety managers echo Osiecki.

"The program will encourage drivers to be much more accountable," said Ronald Uriah, Vice President of Safety and Risk Management for Pitt Ohio Express. "As an industry we struggle with the resources to find this information and this is a great opportunity to help maintain safe highways."

"There's a lot of good drivers out there," Uriah said. "I think there are more good drivers than we know. I think this will encourage drivers to be better and it will encourage those carriers that need to be better to offer more opportunities for training for drivers."

The bad drivers? "We need to know who they are," he said. "They have a choice to make. They can become better or maybe they need to find another occupation. I think the good drivers will be encouraged by this, because they don't want bad drivers on the road either. It gives them a bad name."

Tom Lee, safety director for Mile Hi Frozen Foods, underscored the point. "Our drivers are very comfortable with it because they don't want any of those guys working for us, either. This will help us keep the right people on the road."

Abbott of TransForce said he expects some anxiety from driver community initially - mainly because the program will be an unknown. His counsel to carriers is to work with their drivers to understand the system and make sure that the data is correct.

Ferguson of HireRight said that word is getting out among the company's 20,000 trucking industry clients that this information is going to be available. "We're getting a lot of inquiries from our customers," he said. "It will be well received in the industry."