**Simon&Co. Memo on COVID-19 Vaccine Credentialing**

The Biden administration and private companies are working to develop a standard way of handling credentials – often referred to as “vaccine passports” – that would allow Americans to prove they have been vaccinated against COVID-19. The passports are expected to be free and available through applications for smartphones, which could display a scannable code similar to an airline boarding pass and tamper-proof signatures. Americans without smartphone access should be able to print out the passports, developers have said. The mobile app is currently in the experimental phase. For example, passengers flying between Singapore and London on Singapore Airlines have been trying out IATA Travel Pass, and volunteers on Air France flights from Los Angeles and San Francisco to Paris have been sampling AOKpass.

Driven largely by arms of the Department of Health and Human Services, including an office devoted to health IT, the vaccine credentialing initiative has gained momentum as a growing number of companies say they will require proof of vaccination before opening their doors again. The White House in March took on a larger role coordinating government agencies involved in this effort, led by coronavirus coordinator Jeff Zients. “Our role is to help ensure that any solutions in this area should be simple, free, open source, accessible to people both digitally and on paper, and designed from the start to protect people’s privacy,” Zients said at a [March 12 briefing](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/03/12/press-briefing-by-white-house-covid-19-response-team-and-public-health-officials-14/). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which is participating in the WHO’s effort to create “digital vaccination certificates,” is also preparing to help advise on the passport rollout.

U.S. officials say they are grappling with an array of challenges to this effort including data privacy, health-care equity, machine readability and the sheer number of passport initiatives underway: the Biden administration last month identified [at least 17 in the U.S.](https://www.washingtonpost.com/context/federal-officials-review-vaccine-passport-plans/d40fb0be-fb34-48c9-be39-43d10bb15feb/?itid=lk_inline_manual_18) These initiatives – such as a digital pass devised by IBM that is being tested in New York state – are rapidly moving forward, even as the White House deliberates about how best to track the shots and avoid the perception of a government mandate to be vaccinated. The Biden administration will also have to avoid the gaps in manual reporting experienced by some vaccination sites due to a shortage of workers to log data. The U.S. Digital Service is currently working on a project with the CDC to fortify public health’s technology capabilities, but the project is expected to continue for several months.

One of the teams working on vaccine passports is the [Vaccination Credential Initiative](https://vaccinationcredential.org/), a coalition striving to standardize how data in vaccination records is tracked.[[1]](#footnote-1) The team is aiming to release its free software standards this month, with the hope that developers will use them to help build digital vaccine records that allow people to show they have been inoculated. According to the White House Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information

Technology, proof of vaccination “may be a critical driver for restoring baseline population health and promoting safe return to social, commercial, and leisure activities,” although other

officials have warned of the “confusing array” of efforts underway to create credentials. For instance, Biden’s national coordinator for health information technology, Micky Tripathi, recently said federal officials are concerned with a variety of health-tech challenges, including protecting the credentials against fraud, ensuring data security and making certain that low-income populations are not squeezed out.

1. The Vaccination Credential Initiative includes the Mayo Clinic, Microsoft and more than 225 other organizations, many of which have pledged to use the code when administering shots. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)