MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT POLICY CENTER (MDPC)

MDPC POLICY BRIEF

Protecting Frontline DMW and OWWA Services at Philippine International Gateways

Ensuring Accessible, Permanent and Appropriate Service Facilities for Departing and Returning Overseas Filipino Workers

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Policy Issue

The Department of Migrant Workers (DMW) and the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) maintain frontline services at the Ninoy Aquino International Airport and other international gateways to assist departing and returning overseas Filipino workers.

Recent concerns involving the location, availability and commercial treatment of these government facilities raise an important policy question:

Should DMW and OWWA frontline facilities inside international airports be treated primarily as ordinary commercial tenants, or as essential government migrant-worker service infrastructure?

This issue deserves policy review because the value of these facilities should not be measured only in terms of airport floor space or rental income.

They perform public-service functions directly related to worker protection, welfare assistance, travel facilitation, emergency response and government accountability to migrant workers.

I. Why DMW and OWWA Presence at Airports Matters

For many OFWs, the airport is the first and last point of direct contact with government during the migration cycle.

Airport-based services may assist workers who are:

- departing for overseas employment;
- returning after completion of contract;
- arriving because of illness, termination or distress;
- being repatriated;
- seeking welfare or emergency assistance;
- unfamiliar with airport procedures;
- requiring immediate referral to government services.

For returning workers, particularly those arriving after long flights or difficult employment experiences, accessibility and visibility of government assistance are important.

A counter that exists but is difficult to locate may not effectively serve its intended purpose.

II. Permanence and Visibility Are Service-Delivery Issues

Frequent relocation of an OWWA or DMW counter may cause:

- difficulty locating government assistance;
- confusion among arriving workers;
- inconsistent public information;
- delays in referrals and welfare intervention;
- reduced visibility of government services.

Airport government facilities should therefore be located in areas that are:

- easily identifiable;
- accessible from passenger arrival and departure flows;
- properly signposted;
- sufficiently permanent to allow consistent public information;
- appropriate for confidential or sensitive worker concerns.

Location should be considered part of service quality.

III. DMW and OWWA Are Not Ordinary Airport Tenants

Commercial airport operators have legitimate responsibilities to manage valuable airport space efficiently.

However, DMW and OWWA differ materially from:

- retail stores;
- restaurants;
- commercial lounges;
- travel agencies;
- advertising tenants.

Their airport facilities perform statutory government functions.

This distinction supports consideration of a special institutional arrangement rather than automatically applying ordinary commercial tenancy conditions.

Possible approaches may include:

- government service areas provided without commercial rent;
- preferential government rates;
- dedicated public-service zones;
- long-term space-use agreements;
- cost-sharing arrangements among relevant government agencies;
- integration of DMW and OWWA facilities into airport public-service planning.

The appropriate model should be determined through consultation with airport management and concerned government agencies.

IV. The OFW Gateway Service Concept

MDPC proposes the development of an **OFW Gateway Service Policy** for major Philippine international airports.

The policy could establish minimum standards for government migrant-worker service facilities, including:

Permanent Location

A clearly designated and reasonably stable location in each relevant terminal.

Visibility

Standardized signage directing passengers to DMW and OWWA services.

Accessibility

Locations reasonably accessible to departing and arriving OFWs.

Service Integration

Where feasible, DMW and OWWA services may be coordinated through a common migrant-worker assistance area without erasing the separate mandates of the two agencies.

Emergency Capability

Facilities should support referral and initial response for distressed, medically vulnerable or repatriated workers.

Data and Referral Connectivity

Airport personnel should be capable of referring workers efficiently to:

- OWWA;
- DMW;
- MWO;
- welfare services;
- transport and temporary assistance;
- reintegration programs.

V. Governance Question

The issue should not immediately become a dispute over rent.

The first question should be institutional:

What level of airport presence does the Philippine government consider necessary to discharge its responsibility to migrant workers?

Once that policy is established, the appropriate space, funding and airport arrangements can be negotiated.

The issue therefore merits discussion among:

- DMW;
- OWWA;
- Department of Transportation;
- airport management/operator;
- other relevant airport and government authorities.

VI. Role of OFW Organizations

OFW leaders and organizations may contribute useful evidence on:

- difficulty locating counters;
- experience during arrival and departure;
- most-needed airport services;
- emergency-assistance requirements;
- accessibility concerns.

Their participation should initially be consultative and evidence-based.

The objective should be to improve the government service system rather than turn an operational matter prematurely into a public dispute.

VII. Recommended Immediate Actions

MDPC respectfully recommends:

1. **Joint DMW–OWWA assessment** of all existing service facilities at NAIA, including location, size, cost, visibility and utilization.
2. **Documentation of the present airport-space arrangements**, including any proposed rental or relocation requirements.
3. **Review of complaints and user experience** involving OFWs seeking DMW or OWWA assistance at the airport.
4. **Consultation with airport management and DOTr** on the recognition of migrant-worker facilities as essential government service infrastructure.
5. **Development of a permanent OFW Gateway Service Policy** applicable, where appropriate, to other major international airports.
6. **Consultation with OFW organizations** after the factual and administrative issues are clearly established.

VIII. MDPC Policy Position

DMW and OWWA airport facilities should not be evaluated solely as occupiers of commercially valuable space.

They are part of the government's migrant-worker protection and welfare infrastructure.

The policy objective should therefore be:

Permanent, visible, accessible and adequately supported frontline government services for Filipino migrant workers at the country's major international gateways.

A workable arrangement should respect the operational requirements of airport management while recognizing the special public-service role of DMW and OWWA.

Conclusion

The concern involving airport counters may appear operational, but it raises a larger question about how the State treats migrant-worker services at the country's international gateways.

OFWs should not have to search repeatedly for a government counter whose location has changed.

Government agencies performing statutory migrant-worker functions should likewise not be treated in exactly the same manner as ordinary commercial tenants without first considering their public-service mandate.

A clear **OFW Gateway Service Policy** can provide a durable institutional solution.

MDPC Core Proposition

The country's international gateways should not merely process Filipino migrant workers as passengers. They should also provide them with visible, permanent and accessible government protection and assistance.