



Airports Across the Nation Make Passenger Screening a Private Matter

By Ronnie L. Garrett

From removing shoes and belts for metal detectors to privacy concerns about full-body scans, some airline passengers feel like they receive a virtual shakedown at airport security. Add understaffed checkpoints, overworked screeners and equipment glitches to the mix, and passenger screening quickly becomes a recipe for disaster. As customer complaints skyrocket, so does the risk of dangerous mistakes.

These are among the reasons cited by 17 airports that have opted out of the Transportation Security Administration's (TSA's) traditional screening model in favor of its alternative program, which uses contract security companies.

Montana's Glacier Park International Airport (GPI) is hop-

ing to become the 18th airport in TSA's Screening Partnership Program (SPP). Positive reports about the program attracted the notice of GPI airport director Cindi Martin years ago. After talking to current participants, Martin suspects SPP might work at her airport, which sees about 200,000 passengers annually, most during the area's busy summer tourist season.

The airport's active search for an alternate screening strategy began in 2007, when TSA cut GPI's screening staff in half based on its Staff Allocation Model — a formula used to determine staffing levels for passenger and checked baggage screening.

"We'd already been experiencing a lot of customer service

complaints, and the airlines were taking delays because of screening delays,” Martin recalls.

A TSA reduction would have dealt yet another blow to an already stressed situation. So Martin embarked on what she terms “a very frustrating process” to have staffing numbers reviewed.

TSA eventually increased staffing, but not significantly and not soon enough. “By the time we’d gotten an increase, given the length of time it takes the TSA to hire and train people and put them on the floor, they were unable to staff us appropriately for the summer,” she explains. “That was the real clincher for us.”

Private screening companies, she learned, were much more able to flex their staffing levels to meet the airport’s varying needs. Unlike the federal government, they could expand their ranks when GPI’s passenger loads triples during the summer and contract when the airport’s split-flight schedule takes affect in winter.

Martin remains cautiously optimistic that the airport’s SPP application will receive authorization from TSA before this summer. “My understanding is that all the necessary due diligence has been done, and there is nothing that would stop our application from being approved,” she reports.

Flex & Stretch

Other airports currently using contract screeners also cite flexibility as their primary benefit. According to SPP participants, the ability to adjust staffing levels quickly facilitates more efficient screening and shorter wait times, which translates into satisfied customers and safer flights.

On its website, TSA describes how giving private contractors permission to tweak its traditional staffing model fosters greater flexibility. Although TSA determines staffing levels for private contractors based on airport layout, equipment type, number of passengers, etc., the private companies can tailor those levels to an airport’s unique needs. According to TSA, the “actual number of contract screeners may differ from how the federal government would staff the airport.”

Longtime Proponents

Kansas City International Airport (KCI) was one of five airports that participated in the original SPP pilot — a program TSA was required to establish by the Aviation and Transportation Security Act of 2001. After a positive introduction to the alternative method, the airport remains with private screeners to this day.

According to director of aviation Mark VanLoh, the program works well at KCI because it addresses the unique circumstances of its 12 checkpoints in three separate circular terminals. The airport’s “drive to your gate” layout and the fact that some of its airlines run limited schedules while others launch 70 to 80 flights per day necessitate greater flexibility in staffing checkpoints, explains VanLoh.

“With private screeners, we are able to move personnel around within all three terminals at a moment’s notice,” he notes.

FirstLine, a certified aviation security company headquartered in Cleveland, operates KCI’s screening program. The airport, which averages 200 flights per day, appreciates that FirstLine schedules

screeners around its morning and evening rushes, and adjusts staffing on the fly. For example, if Frontier Airlines has a plane departing in one area with 150 people on it, screeners move to that checkpoint. As soon as those passengers are screened, FirstLine dispatches employees to the checkpoint facing the next large departure.

“During the day, when there are not as many flights, they can move people to where the action is,” VanLoh says. “It’s really fluid, and that’s what we like about it.”

Similar reports come from San Francisco International Airport (SFO), which has used private contractors since the TSA program’s inception. Currently, the airport moves 37.4 million passengers annually and uses Covenant Aviation Security for passenger and baggage screening.

Michael McCarron, SFO director of community affairs, notes that wait times at any of the airport’s eight checkpoints average seven to nine minutes. Covenant’s security control center, where dispatchers monitor cameras placed at security checkpoints, helps the company direct more employees to areas that need them.

“It’s been a really great way to keep screening lines moving and provide outstanding security to our travelers,” says McCarron.

Fewer Customer Complaints

Martin hopes to reduce customer complaints at GPI through contract screening. Although she takes some gripes with a grain of salt, she acknowledges that GPI has its share of legitimate customer complaints regarding security screenings.

Wait times at checkpoints during peak travel times can stretch to 50 minutes. Though GPI reduced wait times by moving and expanding checkpoints to provide more room for divesting and redressing, Martin suspects the rest of the solution resides within SPP.

“People were commenting how rude the TSA employees were on a regular basis,” she says, noting that as wait times increased, passengers became frustrated, and so did screeners. Though the airport’s federal security director (FSD) worked hard to address the problems, she says, his hands were tied because “federal employees are protected in so many ways.”

“We felt a private screening company would be far more responsive,” she explains. “If an individual is truly performing under par, a private company is able to take care of that person more swiftly than the federal government.”

VanLoh agrees, noting that he’s found FirstLine to be far more responsive than KCI’s federal program. He’s quick to emphasize that he’s not knocking federal employees, but rather the sea of governmental red tape that must be navigated to get anything done.

“Every once in awhile you get an employee who’s probably in the wrong line of work,” he explains. “With a private company, if something happens, say a weapon gets through, that employee is gone the next day. If you don’t perform, you’re out. It isn’t a job for life, as federal jobs sometimes seem to be.”

Localizing screening efforts can also provide benefits. “Not every-



Screening Partnership Program FAQs

Q What is the Screening Partnership Program (SPP)?

A SPP manages the use of qualified vendors to perform the screening of passengers and baggage at airports participating in the program.

Q Which airports can participate?

A All commercial airports with federal security screening are eligible to apply. TSA reserves the right to consider an airport's participation based on its record of compliance with security regulations and requirements, along with other issues presented by the SPP Application Committee and TSA's stakeholders during the approval process.

Q Who pays for SPP?

A Funding for SPP comes from the same federal budget line items as federal screening operations.

Q Who sets the security standards for airports in SPP?

A TSA sets the security protocols for all commercial airports nationwide, including airports participating in SPP.

Q Can airports opt back into the federal program if they become dissatisfied with contract screeners?

A Yes.

Q Are airports participating in SPP liable for the actions of private screeners?

A No, TSA sets the contract with the private screening companies. In addition, airport operators do not control federal screening standards and have no authority over TSA screening contractors.

For more information about SPP, visit www.tsa.gov.

one is qualified to do this job," says Gary Smedile, FirstLine vice president of business development. "By utilizing the SPP, you localize recruitment and training of screeners. Private companies also seem to have better business practices, testing processes and monitoring of their employees."

Airports that participate in SPP operate according to federal screening standards and follow federal protocols. TSA selects and certifies eligible contractors, develops their training programs and monitors each company's adherence to its standards.



The L Word

With all the benefits reported by airports using contract screeners, why isn't every airport participating in SPP?

"It's not for everyone," explains VanLoh. "It works well for airports with challenging situations or setups that require enhanced flexibility. For airports our size and complexity, it seems like it's the only option."

Liability concerns prevent many airports from using contract screeners. "Airport operations are concerned if something happens and someone got through with a device, they would be sued into non-existence, but that's simply not true," says VanLoh.

Because TSA contracts with the screening companies, provides oversight for their programs and places FSDs in the airport to monitor their effectiveness, the TSA is "of the opinion that airport operators ... should not face liability for screening services, whether they are provided by TSA employees or companies under contract to TSA."

TSA further clarifies this in Section 44920 of Title 49, United States Code, which states, "an operator of an airport shall not be liable for any claims for damages filed in state or federal court (including a claim for compensatory, punitive, contributory or indemnity damages)," whether the screeners are federal or private.

According to McCarron, airport operators owe it to themselves to investigate the program. "If they think it might address their needs, they should explore it and see if it's a good fit," he says. "We saw this as a good opportunity to have the private sector develop some creative hiring practices and attract good candidates. And as far as we're concerned, the move has been very, very successful." ✈️



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