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“OPERATION SAFE TRAVEL”

*City, State, Federal Agencies Join Forces in Homeland Security Operation
at Salt Lake City International Airport;
69 Face Federal Charges in Effort to Make Utah Airport Safest in the Nation*

SALT LAKE CITY – The United States Attorney’s office has issued arrest warrants for sixty-nine individuals working at Salt Lake City International Airport stemming from alleged violations of law relating to information they provided to employers and airport authorities when they applied for and received security badges allowing them to work at the airport. The charges are detailed in indictments returned by a federal grand jury last Thursday. Today’s arrests are part of “Operation Safe Travel,” a coordinated city, state and federal effort to prevent acts of terrorism.

The 69 individuals are employed by private companies operating at the airport. These individuals work for companies who provide services such as security screening; food services; fueling of aircrafts; cargo handling; cleaning/housekeeping services inside the airport, on ramps leading to planes and on airplanes; airplane service and maintenance; and maintenance and construction in secure areas at the airport.

“We will prosecute aggressively to secure the safety of the public. Americans who pass through our nation’s airports and who travel on our nation’s airlines must and will be protected. The Justice Department will enforce the law fully and vigorously to protect Americans,” said Attorney General John Ashcroft.

“This is not simply a prosecution story. This is an effort to prevent and disrupt potential opportunities for trouble at the airport,” said U.S. Attorney Paul Warner. “While there is no evidence that anyone indicted as a part of Operation Safe Travel has attempted any kind of terrorist activity at the airport or that the airport is anything less than completely safe, in today’s environment we are not going to wait around for something to happen. The operation we are discussing today is a pro-active strike to make a safe airport even safer. This is a joint anti-terrorism effort that will be on going to ensure the safety of our airport.”

Of the 69 individuals charged in indictments as a part of the operation, 61 individuals have Security Identification Display Area (SIDA) badges which allow them access to highly secure areas of the airport, including access to planes, runways, ramps leading to planes, and cargo areas. For example, three of those indicted are airport security screeners.

Although charges vary from individual to individual, in general these 61 are charged with violations of federal law relating to INS and Social Security issues. The charges include making false statements, using counterfeit, altered or fraudulent Social Security cards, using false alien registration cards and numbers, using false alien registration information, and making false representations about citizenship status to obtain employment and security badges. Most indictments include three to five counts. All are believed to be in the country illegally.

“These are people who have misrepresented who they are. Through their use of false information and altered or counterfeit documents, they were able to obtain security badges that put them one card-swipe away from access to the most secure areas of the airport. We cannot have individuals, who have been untruthful in obtaining security clearances, working at our airport,” Warner said.

In addition to these 61 individuals, two others with public access badges also were indicted on similar charges. Public access badges allow employees access to concourse areas of the airport. These areas, while not classified as secure, are sensitive areas.

Finally, six individuals are charged with making false statements about their criminal history to receive a security badge. Had they been truthful about past criminal conduct, they would have been disqualified from receiving the security badge. Four of the six received secure badges; two had public access badges but could be escorted into a secure area by someone with a SIDA badge.

INS will initiate administrative actions for around another 200 or so airport employees, who are in the country illegally, who allegedly improperly obtained public access badges.

“Operation Safe Travel” began in the weeks following the terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C., with initial independent investigations by INS and Social Security Administration’s Office of Inspector General offices in Salt Lake City. Both agencies were conducting audits of employees at the airport when they noticed some irregularities with Social Security numbers and citizenship status.

The Social Security Administration sees its mission in investigating the misuse of Social Security as an important role in helping to protect homeland security. “As Inspector General of the Social Security Administration, my office is charged with protecting Social Security programs from fraud, waste, and abuse. One of the most important aspects of our mission is our oversight of the misuse of the Social Security number and by extension, its influence on identity theft and homeland security,” James G. Huse, Jr., Inspector General for the Social Security Administration said.

“Operation Safe Travel is a prime and timely example of the seriousness of SSN misuse. The individuals involved had various degrees of access to airport facilities and any number of them could have compromised the integrity of the security systems in place. This operation also highlights the need for all employers to be more vigilant in verifying the identity and Social Security number of

individuals being hired in all work environments, not just those directly related to national security,” Huse said.

After coordinating with federal prosecutors, the investigations were combined and a task force initiated to address the concerns.

Agencies involved in “Operation Safe Travel” include the U.S. Attorney’s Office; the State of Utah’s Homeland Security Task Force; the INS; the Social Security Administration’s Office of Inspector General; the FAA; the Department of Transportation’s Office of Inspector General; U.S. Customs Service; the U.S. Marshals Service; the FBI; and the Salt Lake City Airport Police Department.

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