

# DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

## Office of Inspector General

### Transportation Security Administration's Revised Security Procedures (Unclassified Summary)



## Office of Audits

OIG-05-51

September 2005

Office of Inspector General

U.S. Department of Homeland  
Security  
Washington, DC 20528



Homeland  
Security

## Preface

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Office of Inspector General (OIG) was established by the Homeland Security Act of 2002 (*Public Law 107-296*) by amendment to the Inspector General Act of 1978. This is one of a series of audit, inspection, and special reports prepared by our office as part of our DHS oversight responsibilities to promote economy, effectiveness and efficiency within the department.

This report represents an abbreviated version of our report containing sensitive security information that assesses actions by TSA to improve the handling of threat and non-threat communications and ensure airlines properly search aircraft for prohibited items. It is based on interviews with employees and officials of government agencies and private companies, direct observations, and a review of applicable documents.

The information contained in this report has been developed to the best knowledge available to us, and had been discussed in draft with appropriate management officials. It is our hope that this report will result in more effective, efficient, and economical operations. We express our appreciation to all of those who contributed to the preparation of this report.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Richard L. Skinner".

Richard L. Skinner  
Inspector General

---

*Department of Homeland Security  
Office of Inspector General*

## **Executive Summary**

TSA's Contact Center has made improvements to its procedures to ensure that communications containing potential security violations, threat information, or criminal activities are forwarded to TSA security operations.<sup>1</sup> These improvements include more clearly defining reportable communications, improving the training for customer service operators on potential security threats, hiring Contact Center security specialists, and establishing an email filtering system that recognizes key words and phrases so that they can be sent directly to a security mailbox where the security specialist reviews them. In addition, in December 2004, the Contact Center began operating 24 hours per day, 7 days a week. TSA has also improved its procedures for inspecting aircraft.

However, further improvements were needed. Specifically, the Contact Center was not always timely in reviewing and forwarding to the TSA operations center communications containing potential security violations, threat information, or criminal activities. Furthermore, air carrier personnel or contractors were not performing security searches of all interior areas of aircraft, as required by TSA regulations. Finally, air carriers were not always maintaining documentation of security searches, and TSA was not consistently reviewing available security search documentation.

## **Introduction**

From February 2003 to September 2003, a 20-year-old college student breached TSA security checkpoints on multiple occasions and concealed prohibited items in the lavatory areas of the aircraft. Each time the student placed the items in a plastic bag with a note explaining his reasons for committing the breach. The student also sent an email to the TSA Contact Center on September 15, 2003, identifying himself and describing six

---

<sup>1</sup> TSA's Transportation Security Coordination Center through March 2004, or TSA's Transportation Security Operations Center after March 2004.

---

*Department of Homeland Security  
Office of Inspector General*

security breaches and the items he had hidden on aircraft. However, TSA took no action on the email. On October 16, 2003, the concealed items, along with the notes from the student, were found aboard two aircraft during maintenance checks. This incident highlighted aviation security vulnerabilities and disclosed weaknesses in TSA's handling of communications that may indicate threats as well as lapses in airlines' security searches of aircraft.

TSA requires aircraft operators to conduct a security search of each airplane cockpit, cabin, and cargo area, as a part of or after servicing operations, by personnel who have been trained to perform an aircraft security search. Searches are required at the beginning of the day for aircraft flying to a U.S. or Canadian destination, and for all departures to an international destination.

The incident prompted actions by TSA to improve the handling of threat and non-threat communications<sup>2</sup> and ensure airlines properly search aircraft for prohibited items. The report presents our assessment of TSA's actions. We focused our review on answering two key questions:

- Are TSA's communications handling procedures adequate to ensure timely processing of security related information?
- Is TSA's aircraft inspection regimen adequate to ensure timely discovery of prohibited items on aircraft?

We performed this assessment in response to a request from the Committee on Government Reform, U.S. House of Representatives.

---

<sup>2</sup> Communications include emails, postal mail, faxes, and telephone calls.

**Additional Information and Copies**

To obtain additional copies of this report, call the Office of Inspector General (OIG) at (202) 254-4100, fax your request to (202) 254-4285, or visit the OIG web site at [www.dhs.gov](http://www.dhs.gov).

**OIG Hotline**

To report alleged fraud, waste, abuse or mismanagement, or any other kind of criminal or noncriminal misconduct relative to department programs or operations, call the OIG Hotline at 1-800-323-8603; write to Department of Homeland Security, Washington, DC 20528, Attn: Office of Inspector General, Investigations Division – Hotline. The OIG seeks to protect the identity of each writer and caller.