

DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

Office of Inspector General

Review of TSA Screening Practices in Houston, Texas



Notice: The Department of Homeland Security, Office of Counsel to the Inspector General, has reviewed this report and excised information according to Freedom of Information Act, 5 U.S.C. § 552, as amended.

Office of Audits

OIG-04-48

September 2004



**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, investigative, and special reports prepared by the OIG as part of its DHS oversight responsibility to identify and prevent fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement.

This report represents an abbreviated version of our classified review of the Transportation Security Administration's screening practices in Houston, Texas. It is based on interviews with employees and officials of relevant agencies and institutions, direct observations, and a review of applicable documents.

The recommendations herein, if any, have been developed to the best knowledge available to the OIG, and have been discussed in draft with those responsible for implementation. It is my hope that this report will result in more effective, efficient, and economical operations. I express my appreciation to all of those who contributed to the preparation of this report.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Clark Kent Ervin".

Clark Kent Ervin
Inspector General

OIG

Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General

Introduction

In response to a request from the Ranking Member of the House Select Committee on Homeland Security, we inquired into allegations related to the TSA passenger screening security program at the George Bush Intercontinental (Bush) and William P. Hobby (Hobby) Airports in Houston, Texas. The request was prompted by a TV news report citing statements by screeners at both airports that, among other things, TSA management encouraged screeners to ignore alarms signaling potentially dangerous items in checked bags.

We observed screening operations for passengers and checked baggage at both Houston airports. Also, we interviewed:

- Federal Security Directors (FSDs) and Assistant FSDs for Screening at both Houston airports,
- Seven screeners, eight lead screeners, and seven supervisors at Bush Airport, and
- Ten screeners, eight lead screeners, and three supervisors at Hobby Airport.

We also considered the results of our other work relating to screener operations, including recently completed covert testing of screeners at 15 domestic airports and TSA's pilot airport screener program.

Results in Brief

With one exception, which occurred after our initial visit to the airport, we found no conclusive evidence that TSA airport managers and supervisors purposely directed or encouraged screeners to ignore alarms, standard operating procedures, or alternative operating procedures for screening checked baggage allowed under TSA guidelines. However, screeners whom we interviewed at both airports

said that inconsistent direction from their managers and supervisors was a problem. Inconsistent direction from managers and supervisors creates confusion, suspicion, and stress.

While many other allegations could not be substantiated, some allegations relating to inadequate screener staffing and training also appear to be valid. In a classified report on Passenger and Baggage Screening Procedures at 15 Domestic Airports, we recommended improvements in training, equipment and technology, policy and procedures, and management and supervision. In addition, as a result of our reviews of the Houston airport allegations, and publicly reported incidents at other airports, we are recommending that TSA provide clear and consistent guidance and training on what TSA managers, supervisors, and baggage handlers are to do in specific situations. We will continue to monitor screener performance at domestic airports as part of our oversight of screener operations.

TSA agreed with our recommendation and will continue to monitor and investigate screening procedures at the Houston airports to ensure compliance.

Department of Homeland Security

The Secretary
Deputy Secretary
Under Secretary for Border & Transportation Security
Chief of Staff
General Counsel
DHS OIG Liaison
DHS Public Affairs

Transportation Security Administration

Assistant Secretary
Audit Liaison

Office of Management and Budget

Chief, Homeland Security Branch
DHS OIG Budget Examiner

Congress

House Select Committee on Homeland Security
Congressional Oversight and Appropriations Committees, as appropriate

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/oig.

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.