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OIG 3-01

Contacts:
David Barnes, OIG, 202-366-6312
Laura Brown, FAA, 202-267-3883

Initial Findings of Review of Argenbright Security, Inc.

The U.S. Department of Transportation's Office of Inspector General (OIG) and Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) today released initial results of an ongoing review of background checks of security screeners employed by Argenbright Security, Inc. at 14 airports. The special security assessment was begun Friday, October 12 by joint teams composed of officials from OIG and FAA.

The assessment was initiated after the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania filed a petition October 11 to order Argenbright to answer charges that they continue to violate a probation agreement regarding the hiring of screeners at Philadelphia International Airport without appropriate background checks or training. A court hearing is set for October 23 in U.S. District Court in Philadelphia.

Argenbright was sentenced on October 20, 2000 in U.S. District Court in Philadelphia on charges of making false statements to FAA concerning the training, testing and background verification of employees. An OIG investigation found that in some cases, convicted felons had been hired as security screeners. Argenbright was placed on three years' probation and was ordered to pay \$1,550,000 in fines and restitution, including: 1) a \$1 million fine; 2) \$350,000 payment to airlines Argenbright provided services to as reimbursement for fraudulent billings; and 3) \$200,000 for investigative costs.

A subsequent FAA audit of Argenbright's operations at Philadelphia International Airport and other airports found possible violations of FAA regulations, including the continued badging of new employees prior to completing their background checks and allowing them access to secure areas of the airport. Argenbright was also not conducting nationwide criminal background checks as previously ordered, according to the U.S. Attorney's filing.

At the request of Transportation Secretary Norman Y. Mineta, a joint OIG-FAA team was dispatched to Philadelphia on October 11 to scrutinize screening operations and ensure that Federal standards are being enforced. The team was also to ensure that the court's compliance order is adhered to by Argenbright Holdings, with specific focus on verifying employee background checks, testing and training.

Subsequently, OIG and FAA, in cooperation with the Justice Department, initiated assessments for other airports cited in the U.S. Attorney's filing. A copy of the filing is available on the U.S. Attorney's web site at <http://www.usao-edpa.com/press.htm>.

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Preliminary findings of the assessment have found that:

- Screeners at some airports had a prior criminal record that should have disqualified them from employment in security sensitive positions. For example, a screener at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport was removed from his post and had his secure area identification badge revoked after investigators learned he had been convicted on charges of being a felon in possession of a handgun.
- Investigators have also worked with the Immigration and Naturalization Service to determine whether employees who were foreign nationals had authorization to work in the U.S. INS detained seven screeners at Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport after finding they were illegally working in the U.S.
- An individual was arrested by OIG special agents at Washington Dulles International Airport on October 13 after he passed through a security checkpoint with a concealed pocketknife on his person. The individual was detained and was arraigned October 15 in U.S. District Court in Alexandria, VA on charged of attempting to board an aircraft with a concealed weapon. A preliminary hearing was set for October 23.
- Also at Dulles, 7 out of 20 screeners re-tested during a spot check at a security checkpoint by OIG were not able to pass the skills tests required as a condition of employment. To be employed as a screener, applicants must complete 12 hours of instruction, pass a written test and be re-tested on an annual basis. The employees were removed from their screening positions.

Separately, Secretary Mineta announced October 12 that separate FAA teams will begin auditing background checks of all U.S. airport security screeners, starting with those employed at the nation's 20 largest airports.

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