



TSA Under Fire for Long Airport Lines

Burt Carey

May 18, 2016

From New York to Chicago to Atlanta and other major U.S. cities, airport travelers have been complaining for weeks about delays and long lines at security checkpoints.

On Friday Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson tried to quell the unrest, announcing that the beleaguered Transportation Security Administration would be adding hundreds of front-line screeners at the nation's busiest airports.

TSA Administrator Peter Neffenger apologized during remarks made at a travel conference in Houston Tuesday, noting that more than 450 would-be passengers at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport missed flights Sunday and Monday because of long lines at security areas.

"We had a significant challenge in Chicago yesterday," Neffenger said. "I don't know what that was, but fixing that, that is of great concern to me. I always tell people I won't apologize for doing our job well, but I do apologize to the people who found themselves stranded in Chicago yesterday."

Neffenger said TSA would be adding 300 officers to O'Hare's operations by mid-August, and that plans are in place to hire an additional 468 officers nationwide. Johnson, speaking at a news conference at Reagan National Airport on Friday, said the agency will be using overtime and the deployment of more bomb-sniffing dogs to speed up security checks.

"We want to keep passengers moving, but we want to keep passengers safe," Johnson said. "No, it's not a permanent solution, (but) no one should have to wait three hours to get to the gate."

Neffenger blames the long lines on a shortage of officers, saying some 4,644 TSA officers were lost due to budget cuts in 2014. "When I came into this organization last year, I found an organization with 5,800 fewer screeners, and it had fewer front-line officers than it had four years previously," Neffenger said. "And that was in the face of significantly higher traffic volume."

Chris Edwards, director of tax policy studies at the Cato Institute, isn't buying Neffenger's story. Edwards, who runs Cato's [Downsizing Government blog](#), says bad management is the culprit.

"Annual surveys of federal government employees find that the TSA and the broader Homeland Security Department have some of the poorest morale in the federal government," Edwards said.

“The TSA has a high turnover rate for their screeners, which is not good for morale and is not good for security.”

Edwards says the TSA has simply directed its budget to the wrong areas. “TSA has spent many billions of dollars on things that don’t work,” he said. “As a result, they’ve starved their budget from hiring more screeners to reduce congestion.

“Remember those full-body scanning machines that were in airports for years that essentially showed nude pictures of passengers as they got screened?” asked Edwards. “Those things were eventually withdrawn because of civil liberties concerns. People didn’t want to see their nude bodies when they went to the airport. But those things have been found to not really work at all. It’s fairly easy to slip guns and plastic explosives through those machines.”

Illinois Sen. Mark Kirk, a Republican, was even more blunt in criticizing the TSA and Neffenger in particular. “The flying public is experiencing a high security risk and economic burden from unnecessary wait times and missed flights due to insufficient staffing at TSA,” Kirk said. “If travelers do not have relief by Memorial Day, TSA Administrator Neffenger must resign and be replaced with a leader who can provide fast and secure screening.”

As late as Tuesday passengers were being told to allow for a three-hour screening process at some major airports.