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Airport screening called OK, for now

Officials: Inspection rate must stay at 100%

Saturday, May 29, 2004

BY RON MARSICO
Star-Ledger Staff

Members of New Jersey's congressional delegation served notice to federal aviation security officials yesterday that Newark Liberty International Airport must continue to electronically screen 100 percent of checked baggage for explosives, even as the busy summer travel season soon peaks.

Appearing near bomb-detection machines at Terminal C, U.S. Sen. Jon Corzine (D-N.J.) and three congressmen warily accepted the U.S. Transportation Security Administration's assurances that the agency had finally met the requirement on Wednesday -- nearly a year and a half after the original deadline set by Congress.

"Our job is to make sure that people's feet are held to the fire," said Corzine, who said the airport's actions must be monitored.

As of Wednesday, the TSA said, all of the roughly 40,000 bags checked onto planes each day at the Newark airport are going through the SUV-sized bomb-detection machines, or being swiped with a sterile cloth that is then put into a computerized system to test for explosives residue.

The baggage checks were stepped up after a story in The Sunday Star-Ledger earlier this month outlined the concerns of TSA screeners and supervisors that staffing shortages at Newark were allowing thousands of checked bags to go onto planes each day without being electronically screened for explosives.

Even though Newark Airport was one of three airports used by the 9/11 terrorist hijackers, it had been one of only a handful of the nation's 429 airports to miss the December 2002 deadline and a one-year extension. TSA officials blamed that on severe manpower shortages.

Corzine and Reps. William Pascrell Jr. (D-8th Dist.), Robert Menendez (D-13th Dist.) and Donald Payne (D-10th Dist.) met privately earlier with Marcus Arroyo, the TSA's federal security director at the airport, to assess progress toward ensuring passenger safety.

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"After having a year -- a year -- of fighting to get to this level, we want TSA to understand that we intend to be vigilant," said Menendez.

Asked how the 100 percent screening requirement had finally been met, Arroyo told reporters, "Since April 18, we've been on a steady hiring path, and we brought on 350 people."

Though the dictate was met during a light week in the lull before major summer travel starts, Arroyo said he expects the 100 percent electronic screening of checked luggage will continue.

"I do believe we will be able to do it," said Arroyo. "We'll probably have to resort to overtime to do it."

Arroyo said the airport now has 1,465 security screeners, including 123 part-time employees, adding that the total number will increase to 1,474 within a week.

But the congressional delegation said more screeners are needed.

"We are at least 150 to 200 people short in this airport," warned Pascrell, though he stressed the airport is now safe.

Arroyo, who has been privately criticized by some screeners and supervisors for the airport's security problems, was praised by lawmakers because they said he suffered from a lack of resources from TSA in Washington.

"I think Marcus has done a great job," Pascrell said. "He's working with what he has. ... He didn't have the trained personnel."

Ron Marsico covers Newark Airport. He can be reached at rmarsico@starledger.com or (973) 392-7860.

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