Waiting in Queue: Options for Addressing the Airport Screening Line Conundrum

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Related Author

- [Bart Elias](#)

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Bart Elias, Specialist in Aviation Policy (belias@crs.loc.gov, 7-7771)


It has been widely reported that airport passenger screening checkpoint lines are getting longer, leading to long wait times and missed flights, although reliable wait time data are generally lacking. The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) is currently facing a screener staffing shortage. Screener attrition has more than doubled over the past six years, rising to about 13% in FY2015. Shortages may also be partly attributable to overestimation of enrollment in TSA's PreCheck program, which allows travelers who have completed security checks to use expedited screening lanes.

Appropriations language has capped the total number of full-time equivalent screeners for several years. For FY2016 the cap remained at 45,000. Current TSA screener levels stand at about 42,500, well below historical levels, although TSA recently received approval to increase those ranks by about 750 in FY2016 and increase overtime through the summer months.

While staffing has fallen, TSA is facing increased passenger demand (See **Figure 1**). Moreover, passengers are lugging more carry-on bags to avoid airlines' checked baggage fees. TSA projects that wait times will grow longer unless action is taken.

Figure 1. TSA Screener Staffing and Airline Passengers

FY2007-FY2017 Historical and Forecast Data
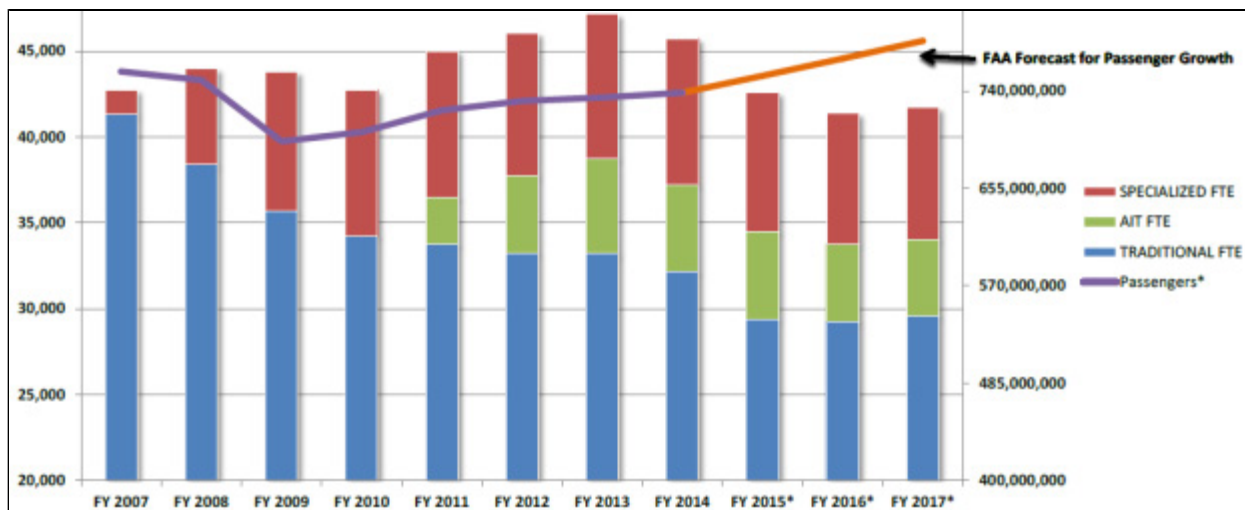
Source: Department of Homeland Security, *Congressional Budget Justification, FY 2017 —Volume II.*

Notes: Specialized full-time equivalents (FTEs) include behavior detection officers, team leaders, supervisors, and managers. AIT refers to personnel trained and designated to operate advanced imaging technology (AIT) whole-body scanners. Y-axis left scale indicates number of screeners, while right scale refers to number of passengers. Purple line indicates actual passenger counts, and orange line indicates Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) forecast for passenger growth.

Several options are available to address the problem:

Opting for Private Screeners

Airports could seek TSA approval to switch to private screening under statutory authority referred to as the opt-out provision. The benefits of doing so, however, may be limited by statutory requirements that the pay and benefits of private screeners be on par with TSA screeners and by the fact that private screening firms would be under contract to the TSA and not to the airport.

Currently, 22 airports, including San Francisco and Kansas City international airports, have private screeners. Concerns over lengthy security delays, however, are reportedly prompting other large airports, including Seattle-Tacoma, Atlanta, and New York-area airports to explore the idea.

Expanding Expedited Screening

Another option is to increase the number of passengers that get expedited screening. This could be done by increasing PreCheck enrollment. H.R. 2843 and similar language in the Senate-passed Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) reauthorization bill (H.R. 636) seek to expand PreCheck by involving private firms in marketing the program and enrolling passengers. The bills would also require the program's expedited screening lanes to be open at all peak and high-volume travel times. As of December 2015, about 2 million travelers had signed up for PreCheck. Additionally, about 4 million enrolled in Customs and Border Protection trusted traveler programs may also use PreCheck lanes.

One way of expanding enrollment would be to open the program to additional individuals already holding security clearances. Currently, PreCheck is available to service members and civilian employees of the Department of Defense, but is generally not available to employees with security clearances who work for other government agencies or contract firms.

PreCheck could potentially attract more applicants from the general public by lowering enrollment fees. Currently, the fee is set at $85 for a five-year membership. While the fee is set to recover the costs of processing enrollments, TSA

could charge less than the full cost in the hope that the unrecovered enrollment costs would be offset by additional efficiencies in passenger screening.

A more controversial option to increase the use of expedited screening would be to bring back "managed inclusion," a process of selecting certain passengers for PreCheck lanes based on threat assessments, behavioral observations, and canine team evaluations. Managed inclusion was phased out in 2015 over concerns that it introduced security vulnerabilities and diminished the value of PreCheck membership.

Increasing Screener Staffing and Addressing Organizational Factors

TSA may need to reallocate screeners among airports. TSA could also reduce or eliminate certain specialized positions, particularly behavior detection officers whose role has been questioned. Also, with congressional approval, TSA could reprogram funds allocated for procurement of screening equipment or other purposes and use them to hire more staff. However, doing so could affect efforts to streamline passenger screening by investing in advanced screening technologies with higher throughput. Striking a balance between near-term needs and long-term objectives could present TSA with difficult choices.

TSA may also need to examine aspects of its organizational culture and practices that may be contributing to difficulties in hiring and retaining screeners. Measuring performance and improving accountability have been long-standing congressional concerns. For example, H.R. 4439 (109th Congress) sought to establish a performance-based Airport Screening Organization modeled after FAA's Air Traffic Organization, and proposed incentives for airports that achieved cost savings by using private screening firms that exceeded specified performance goals.

Improving Metrics and Traveler Information

Near-term options could involve directing TSA to work more closely with airlines and airports to better match screener checkpoint assignments and schedules with flight schedules and to improve the management of security checkpoint queues based on detailed analysis of passenger movements. Finally, TSA could improve how it collects and communicates wait time information to the public. Current wait time data available from TSA are based on traveler self-reports and are generally not reliable. Reliable wait time data could better inform travelers to help plan their travel to the airport, potentially relieving strains on TSA resources. Such an approach is in use at Cincinnati airport, which has implemented wireless signal tracking to gauge passenger movements and digital signage to convey meaningful wait time information to travelers.