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JFK Security Screener Fired



AP Photo

On Thursday, scores of passengers were delayed at JFK's American Airlines Terminal because of an evacuation.

Action taken after evacuation of 900

By Sylvia Adcock
STAFF WRITER

A security screener at Kennedy Airport who didn't follow procedures was fired Friday after federal agents forced the evacuation of part of an American Airlines terminal Thursday night.

The screener, who worked for a contractor that provides security for American, had not used a metal-detecting wand as required after a passenger set off an alarm.

No weapons were found, but a Federal Aviation Administration security agent who was watching the checkpoint at Terminal 8 ordered the evacuation of some 900 passengers for more than two hours. The evacuation came two days after Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta vowed to crack down on lapses in airport security, including one in which someone mistakenly brought a gun through the checkpoint with no notice in New Orleans.

Mineta said in a speech on Tuesday he had met with FAA security agents and told them to tolerate no lapses. "If a secure area is breached, FAA agents will empty the concourse, re-screen passengers, and if necessary, hold flights," he said, noting that despite new security measures, "an unacceptable number of deficiencies continue to occur."

The actions come in the midst of a fierce debate in Washington over whether the screeners should be federal employees. Under the current system, airlines hire low-bid contractors to provide security. One Transportation Department source said the evacuations are a way for the FAA to exert more control over a system the agency oversees.

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NEWSDAY, SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 3, 2001

JFK Security Screener Dismissed

SECURITY from A8

The incident at Kennedy was detected by an FAA security agent who was observing the security checkpoint at Concourse A in Terminal 8, one of about 450 agents around the country who test and oversee security. In the past, violations of security measures might mean a fine for the airline involved, but only after a lengthy legal process.

Shutting down a concourse and delaying flights costs the airlines money, providing an immediate incentive. "This is holding the airlines more accountable. They are more motivated," the source said.

Thursday night, passengers on two planes that hadn't left the gate had to get off the plane and leave the concourse along with the 900 other passengers who had to be evacuated. They all had to be screened again at the security checkpoint, where an additional 700 passengers were waiting for screening to get to their gates.

In all, the evacuation delayed six flights, with delays from 40 minutes to four hours.

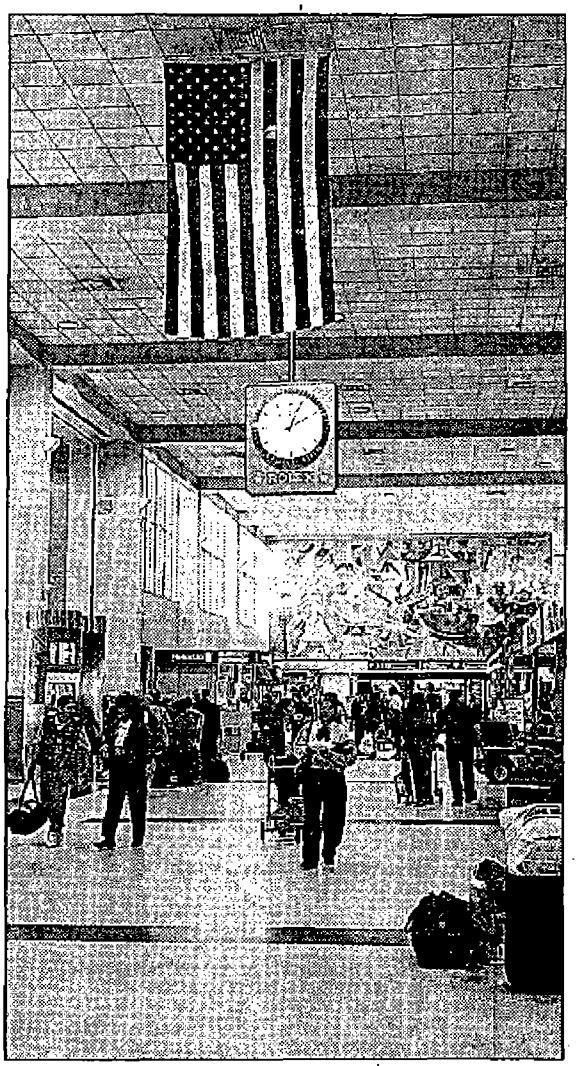
The employee worked for Worldwide Flight Services based in Dallas. "When we followed up with the security company, they fired the individual that did the improper screening," American spokesman Marty Heires said.

"Secretary Mineta called for zero tolerance and we support that," he said.

Paula Hogan of Middle Village said Friday she was glad she wasn't flying out of Kennedy Thursday, but she said she was relieved that the government took action. "I'm glad they stopped everything and made everyone go through again," she said. "I would have waited forever if I'd been here" and there had been a security problem, she said. At Long Island MacArthur Airport in Islip, the security force has been bolstered by the presence of Suffolk County Police officers and members of the New York National Guard. The Town of Islip, which owns and operates the airport, also has indefinitely closed the hourly parking lot in front of MacArthur's terminal and suspended curbside check-in.

Trish Pasciutti, a spokeswoman, declined to discuss other security measures in effect at the airport. "We're doing whatever is necessary to keep our passengers safe and secure," she said.

Staff writers Tom McGinty and Devi Athiappan contributed to this story.



Newsday Photo / J. Conrad Williams Jr.

After Thursday's chaos, it was business as usual Friday at Kennedy Airport's American Airlines terminal.

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