



Passenger safety at risk?

***Sea-Tac air travelers voice concerns
about the working conditions of
airport security personnel***

Washington Citizen Action – July 2001

Sea-Tac air travelers voice concerns about the working conditions of airport security personnel

Summary

A June 2001 Sea-Tac air traveler survey conducted by Washington Citizen Action and the Northwest Federation of Community Organizations found air travelers have high levels of concern about the working conditions of security screeners.

Sea-Tac airport pre-board security screeners control the points of entry into Sea-Tac passenger concourses. They are responsible for screening passengers and their hand luggage for weapons and explosives by using metal detectors, x-ray machines and chemical residue detectors.

The majority of the 622 air travelers surveyed were extremely or very concerned about the working conditions of the security screeners. In particular, travelers were concerned about the low wages, lack of health benefits, short and inadequate training, and high turnover among passenger security screeners. Add to these the travelers who were “moderately concerned” and the totals exceed 70% for every category, showing widespread anxiety about the level of passenger safety and concern for screener pay and working conditions. Passengers were most concerned about the lack of health benefits and adequate training for security screeners.

Passengers interviewed saw many of these problems as interrelated. “I’m struck by passengers expressing ‘rage’ at security screeners,” said Christine Lehmann of Seattle. “They have to deal with these people. They don’t receive compensation for the stress or importance of their jobs. If we really cared about the front line of defense and passenger safety, we should care about the

workers' safety and well being. Make it a job where screeners can support their families with health care and a living wage."

Background

Nationally, between 1990 and 2000, screeners located nearly 23,000 firearms and numerous explosive devices, resulting in nearly 9,400 arrests.¹ Without their hard work, airports would not be as safe as they are today.

The airlines are responsible for passenger safety and security, but use contractors to do the work. Pre-board security contractors at Sea-Tac include Huntleigh/ICTS and Olympic. Screeners are employed directly by these contracted firms. Within an airport, the more prominent airlines have greater control over contractor selection and oversight of quality security standards. At Sea-Tac, the largest airlines are Alaska, Northwest, and United.



***Pre-board screeners
don't receive
compensation
for the stress or
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of their jobs.
—Christine Lehmann***

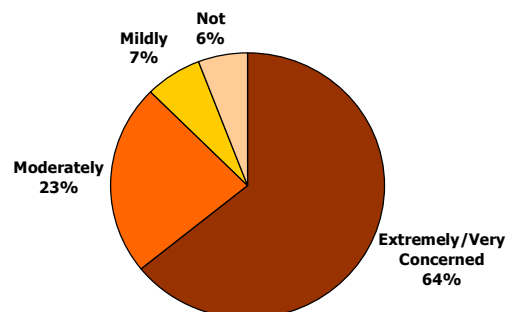
Air Traveler Concern #1

Lack of health insurance for security screeners

Screening companies at Sea-Tac offer no company-paid or subsidized health insurance.² Yet the flying public relies on the eyes, ears and alertness of pre-board screeners to protect them from explosive materials, violence and hijacking.

But the flying public is dissatisfied. Sixty-four percent of travelers were concerned about lack of health care benefits and routine eye, ear or other medical screening.

Passengers highly concerned about lack of health care

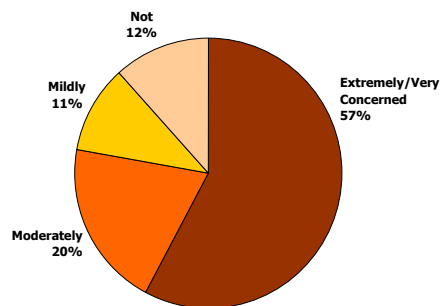


Air Traveler Concern #2

Lack of adequate use of force training

Passengers also were concerned that security screeners are not armed and do not receive any training on how to subdue a dangerous person—

Air travelers concerned about screeners lack of use of force training



57% were extremely or very concerned. “I am concerned that screeners are not getting enough training,” says traveler Mario Penalver of Puyallup. “The safety of passengers is very important. If the training isn’t adequate, then citizens’ lives are on the line.”

“I talked to a screener and was very surprised to find out about how little training they received,” said Connie Linden of Tacoma. “That scares me. I had also assumed they had decent pay and benefits. With low pay and high turnover, you’re losing all that experience all the time.”



Citizens' lives are on the line if training isn't adequate
—Mario Penalver



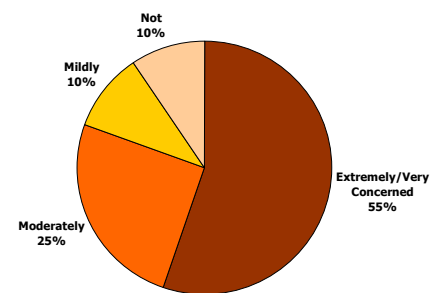
I'm surprised at how little training screeners receive
—Connie Linden

Air Traveler Concern #3

Lack of Living Wage pay

Pre-board screening firms typically employ workers at low wages with few, if any, benefits. Huntleigh screeners, for example, start at an hourly rate of \$8.05 with a discretionary raise to \$8.55 an hour after 6 months; Olympic employees top out at \$8.70 an hour. Customer service supervisors earn \$10 per hour. Huntleigh offers no subsidized health benefits.

High traveler concern about low wages



All of these workers earn less than the \$11.47 an hour area livable wage for a single adult, and far below the \$17.59 an hour needed by an adult with two children, as determined by the University of Washington’s Northwest Policy Center in its joint report with the Northwest Federation of Community Organizations, “Searching for Work that Pays, 2001.”³ This means that security screeners do not earn enough to raise a family in the Seattle area.

Travelers were highly troubled by the low wages paid to these critical workers—55% extremely or very concerned, rising to 80% who were extremely, very or moderately concerned.

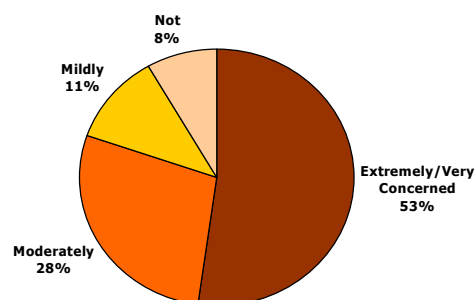
Air Traveler Concern #4

Lack of general training

Upon hiring, security screeners receive about three days of classroom and on-the-job training in security procedures and the operation of concourse checkpoints.

Without adequate training, security screeners cannot rotate through the full range of jobs—causing some high stress jobs to fall most heavily on the small number of senior staff. The WCA passenger survey found that more than half of travelers—52%—were extremely or very concerned about the limited length of training. Only 8% were indifferent.

Three days of training isn't enough

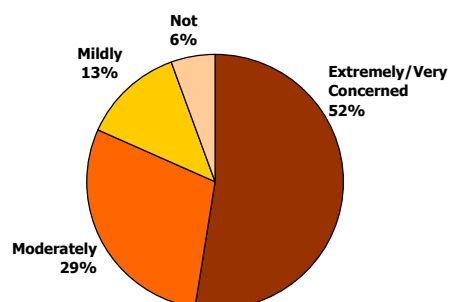


Air Traveler Concern #5

High turnover among security screeners

One result of the low pay and no benefits is that security screeners often leave their jobs in search of work that will support themselves and their families. According to a U.S.

High turnover threatens passengers' safety



General Accounting Office report, the turnover rate for Sea-Tac security screeners between May 1998 and April 1999 was 140%. “The studies have found that the high rate of turnover means that checkpoints are rarely staffed by screeners with much experience,” according to the U.S. General Accounting Office.⁴

One Seattle security screener said that co-workers continue to “drop like flies.” This means that new screeners have to be hired and trained and companies fail to retain their most experienced workers.

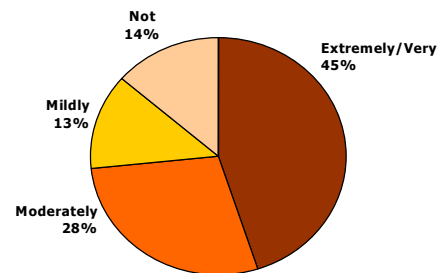
The survey found passengers were worried—52% were extremely or very concerned. Another 25% were moderately concerned.

Air Traveler Concern #6

Infrequent job rotation

Security screeners say that they are supposed to rotate stations every 30 minutes to ensure that they can remain alert and are able to concentrate on the x-ray monitors. Yet at the checkpoints to some concourses, including the Alaska Airlines checkpoint, security screeners say they sometimes remain at the same station for as many as two hours without being relieved.

Passengers highly concerned about infrequent job rotation



Some 45% of travelers said they were extremely or very concerned about the lack of adequate rotation. Another 30% said they were moderately concerned.

Security screeners themselves are concerned about their working conditions

Sea-Tac security screeners also are concerned that their poor working conditions may impact their ability to adequately protect passengers. Interviews with individual screeners, conducted

outside of the passenger survey, revealed that screeners would like more training, health care coverage and livable wages. Many say they work two or more jobs to survive. Screeners have begun to take action on their own behalf to remedy these conditions by joining together with other airport employees to make changes in working conditions. “We are organizing to win health insurance and respect on the job,” said Adnan Kaddah, a Huntleigh screener at Sea-Tac. He continued: “Things need to change. We need more training and good staffing levels at the checkpoints to ensure that we’re alert and doing a good job all the time.”



A lot of people come in to work sick or tired. It's not right.
—Teuila Tuitele
Pre-board screener



'We need more training and good staffing levels to ensure that we're doing a good job all the time.'
—Adnan Kaddah
Pre-board screener

“A lot of people still come in to work even when they’re sick and tired,” says pre-board screener Teuila Tuitele. “It’s not right for us and it’s not right for the passengers.”

Conclusion and recommendations

There is widespread traveler unease with the training, benefits, pay and conditions of airport pre-board security screeners on whom passengers depend for safety in the airport and in the skies. While violence in air travel is thankfully rare, air passenger concerns about air transportation safety will continue to grow unless conditions improve for the workers who serve as the frontline of defense.

The general public has a strong interest in seeing that working conditions for screeners are sufficient to minimize employee turnover and provide a stable, trained and effective workforce.

To protect passengers, screeners must be healthy, well trained, well-rested and alert.

The airlines, which contract with the security screening companies, bear the responsibility of correcting the situation. **Sea-Tac's airlines—especially it's largest ones, Alaska, Northwest and United—must ensure that screeners are paid a living wage, with good health insurance, increased training, adequate staffing and an effective voice on the job.**

About the organization releasing this report

Washington Citizen Action is a grassroots social and economic justice organization comprised of more than 15 coalition members and more than 50,000 families statewide. WCA's goal is to increase participation in economic and political decision-making, to win meaningful and concrete improvements in the lives of Washington state residents, and to unite the major social justice constituencies in Washington toward these goals.

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Methodology

Washington Citizen Action and the Northwest Federation of Community Organizations trained staff and volunteers surveyed 622 Sea-Tac travelers on June 19 and 22, 2001 to determine their level of concern about training and working conditions of pre-board security screeners. Most of those surveyed were flying on Alaska Airlines, the largest carrier at Sea-Tac. Alaska Airlines contracts with Huntleigh/ICTS, a company accused by its employees of violating Federal labor laws and state worker safety laws.

Volunteers asked passengers six questions about their thoughts regarding the training of, and working conditions for, security screeners. The sample was evenly divided between frequent (one or more trips per month) and casual flyers. Passengers were asked if they were “extremely, very, moderately, mildly or not concerned” about the following areas:

Level of traveler concern about pay, working conditions and training of passenger security screeners at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport		
# of passengers responding:	622	
	Extremely or very concerned	Extremely, very or moderately concerned
No health insurance	64%	87%
No use of force training	57%	77%
Low wages	55%	80%
3 days of training	52%	80%
High turnover	52%	77%
Infrequent job rotation	45%	73%

Endnotes

¹ U.S. General Accounting Office, “Aviation Security: Long-Standing Problems Impair Airport Screeners’ Performance,” Page 25, June 2000, GAO/RCED-00-75 <<http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/useftp.cgi?IPaddress=162.140.64.88&filename=rc00075.pdf&directory=/diskb/wais/data/gao>>

² Companies offer health insurance at full cost to the employee, which few, if any, can afford.

³ “Northwest Job Gap Study: Searching for Work That Pays”
<<http://depts.washington.edu/npcbox/publications.html>>

⁴ U.S. General Accounting Office, Page 24

⁵ The concern and rank of concern was consistent by airline, except that the relatively small sample of Northwest passengers (N=29) found those travelers far more concerned about lack of use of force training (79% vs. 56% for all others) than were other passengers of other airlines.