

## U.S. will take over airport security

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WASHINGTON -- For the holiday season and the immediate future, the airline security legislation Congress passed Friday is likely to provide mostly a psychological boost rather than real improvement in protection, aviation security specialists said.

Some expect limited improvements by early next year, even as they warn of possible dangers during a tricky transition period while federal employees take over airport security from private contractors.

The long-term success of the security measures largely rests in the details of enforcement. Ultimately, that hinges on the determination and skill of the person appointed to head a new transportation security agency, as well as the commitment of the rest of the Bush administration, the specialists added.

The House and Senate overwhelmingly approved the bill, which will transfer responsibility for screening passengers and carry-on bags from private contractors to federal employees within a year. President Bush said he will sign the measure into law on Monday, at the start of Thanksgiving week.

All 20 House members from Illinois voted in favor of the legislation, which the House approved 410-9 after the Senate passed it by voice vote. The nine House members who voted no were Republicans.

Congress acted as the airline industry faces mounting losses in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. As the House voted, Atlanta's Hartsfield International Airport was shut down and evacuated because a man sprinted past security screeners and disappeared into the terminal.

"As we begin the busiest travel time of the year, Americans want to feel comfortable about traveling. As these new security measures take place, travelers will have the peace of mind that every step is being taken to improve their safety," said House Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.).

The federal takeover of security screening was the most contentious provision of the legislation, with House Republicans fighting the step as an unwarranted expansion of the federal government.

The measure includes sweeping changes in the way the nation protects travelers in the air. Cockpit doors will be fortified against attack. Pilots will be allowed to carry guns to defend themselves against intruders. Criminal background checks will be required for all employees with access to airport tarmacs.

The legislation also requires tighter controls over checked luggage, now rarely screened on domestic flights. That requirement does not take effect for 60 days, after the end of the holiday travel season.

Moreover, luggage will not have to be inspected with sophisticated explosives-detection equipment until Dec. 31, 2002. The delay is intended to give manufacturers time to make enough equipment to screen at all of the nation's airports.

### Options for short-term

Until then, airlines will have many options for meeting the requirement, including explosives-sniffing dogs; conventional X-ray searches, hand searches or a system of "positive bag matches," meaning a flight could leave the gate only after an airline verified the accompanying passenger also was aboard.

"A lot will depend on specifics," said Arnold Barnett, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor who has studied airline baggage security and consulted for the Federal Aviation Administration.

"If they do canine searches, will every piece of luggage be individually sniffed by a dog? Or will it be sufficient for a dog to come up to a cart of 60 pieces of luggage and take one sniff? That might not do much good, especially if the explosive is loaded in the middle of a cart and the other 59 pieces of luggage have no explosives," Barnett added.

### Delays expected

Stephen Van Beek, senior vice president of the Airports Council International of North America, said the requirement is likely to add to delays.

"There aren't a lot of dogs or bomb-detection machines, a hand-search is an extremely time-laborious system and the airlines have said that matching passengers with their luggage is impractical for them at least in the short term," he said.

The transition to an airport screening system operated by federal employees could leave passengers vulnerable to more security lapses as the Transportation Department manages new responsibilities and current employees become demoralized.

### Transition will take year

The Transportation Department is allowed a year to complete the takeover of airport security as it hires and trains an estimated 28,000 employees for airport security.

Some current employees may be hired for better-paying federal jobs, but many others will be ineligible because of a new requirement that they be U.S. citizens.

Douglas Laird, an aviation security consultant and former director of security for Northwest Airlines, said well over half of all airport security screeners at some major airports are not U.S. citizens.

"It could get a little ragged in the next year," said Mortimer Downey, former deputy secretary of transportation.

"How do you maintain any semblance of performance from the present contractors when they are clearly out of here and a significant percent of their workforce also clearly won't be around? They won't meet the standards for citizenship," Downey added.

Gutierrez back on board

Rep. Luis Gutierrez (D-Ill.) cited the citizenship requirement as the reason he voted against both the Republican- and Democratic-backed versions of the legislation when they were first considered by the House this month.

However, Gutierrez on Friday voted for the final package. The congressman said there were other "significant improvements" in the legislation that justified the change in his position.

Dissenting voters

These nine House members, all Republicans, voted against the aviation security bill:

Kevin Brady, Texas; Howard Coble, North Carolina; Mac Collins, Georgia; Ron Paul, Texas; Bob Schaffer, Colorado; Pete Sessions, Texas; John Shadegg, Arizona; Bob Stump, Arizona; Charles Taylor, North Carolina.

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