

TOP HEADLINE NEWS

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Airport Bag Screeners Given Test Answers

[Associated Press]

The written tests given potential baggage screeners at airports never asked applicants to show they could identify dangerous objects inside luggage.

In addition, screeners hired by the government to check baggage for bombs were given most of the answers to the tests, according to an internal investigation by the Homeland Security Department.

"Not a single question called up on a student to demonstrate a sufficient mastery of the class content to achieve the purpose of the training," the agency's acting inspector general, Clark Kent Ervin, wrote to Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y.

During classroom training, screeners were given the questions in open-book quizzes and then the answers. The course ended with a closed-book examination of 25 questions. Nineteen of the questions on the final test were identical or virtually identical and three were similar to those on the quizzes, Ervin said.

One question asked "How do threats get aboard an aircraft?" The possible answers were (a) In carry-on bags; (b) In checked-in bags; (c) In another person's bag; and (d) All of the above. The correct answer is (d).

A second question asked why it is important to screen bags for improvised explosive devices (IEDs). A possible answer: "The ticking timer could worry other passengers." The right answer: "IEDs can cause loss of lives, property and aircraft."

Schumer, who asked for the investigation, said the point of making airport security a federal function was to improve safety by employing better-trained workers.

"The questions appear as if they were written by Jay Leno's gag writer," said Schumer. "They've got to do a better job."

Ervin's letter to Schumer was dated Aug. 29 but was not released until Wednesday. The senator's office said the letter was meant to be distributed sooner, but got lost in the mail due to problems with the Senate mail system that have been occurring since the anthrax scare about two years ago.

The Transportation Security Administration, created by Congress after the Sept. 11 attacks and later incorporated into the Homeland Security Department, was given the task of hiring tens of thousands of government workers in less than a year. These workers were intended to replace the poorly trained, poorly paid, privately employed screeners who checked passengers before they








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About 30,000 of the screeners have been trained to inspect all checked baggage for bombs using newly installed explosive detection systems or wands that detect traces of explosive chemicals. The agency is continuing to train passenger screeners.

Agency spokesman Brian Turmail said the agency has reviewed and improved its training and may make further improvements. But he also said the inspector general did not look at the entire training program.

He said the one test reviewed by Ervin is part of a broader training program that includes 40 hours of classroom training, 60 hours of on-the-job training and four tests. The tests no longer use the questions cited by the inspector general.

No one becomes a baggage screener unless he demonstrates he can find a bomb in a suitcase using detection machines, Turmail said.

Rep. John Mica, R-Fla., chairman of the House aviation subcommittee, plans to hold a hearing Oct. 16 about the agency's operations, including training and testing of screeners.

"Anytime you have a government undertake a program of this size and scope, it's going to be fraught with problems," Mica said.

John Gage, president of the American Federation of Government Employees, which represents the agency's workers, said the agency needs to do more to make sure training is a priority.

On the Net:

Transportation Security Administration: <http://www.tsa.gov>

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