Aviation security does not end at airports

Increasing number of PreCheck screenings can better protect flights

By SHELDON H. JACOBSON

The recent incident on a United flight from Los Angeles to Boston highlights why aviation security does not end at airport security checkpoints.

The passenger managed to create a weapon using a plastic metal spoon and a flight attendant's makeshift weapon. The passenger also attempted to open the door of the airplane, according to law enforcement officials, and believed that a flight attendant was going to kill him. If restricted, the passenger is subject to hefty fines (as much as $250,000) and life in prison.

There is a high probability that this passenger suffers from mental illness. If that is the case, these penalties serve little purpose. It may provide some deterrence benefit for someone with a clear thinking but it is not the true intent to see how they would be handled if they attempted such acts of violence on an airplane.

The Transportation Security Administration uses multiple layers to protect the nation's air system. The most visible layer is at airport screening checkpoints, where passengers, carry-on bags and checked baggage are screened using a variety of technologies.

A far less visible layer is air marshals, who are strategically assigned to flights based on a variety of risk factors, including the collective risk profile of passengers on a flight. Air marshals are ready to respond if any passengers act inappropriately and threaten the security of a flight, its crew, or its passengers.

Air marshals are a measure to buy down risk and make a flight more secure. However, the expense of placing air marshals on flights means that air marshals are not on most flights. Moreover, the collective risk profile of most flights makes it unnecessary to have an air marshal on them. It appears that the United flight did not have an air marshal, or such a person would have responded to the incident.

The biggest takeaway from the event is how the passengers responded. Several acted quickly and decisively to wrestle the person to the ground and keep him from further harming himself or others. This made these passengers into air marshals.

The basis of risk-based security, the strategy employed by the TSA, is match security resources to security risk. The most effective program that the TSA employs to achieve this is PreCheck. The background check that a PreCheck vetted passenger undergoes makes them known to the TSA, and known passengers are considered to have far less risk than unknown passengers.

An entire airplane of PreCheck vetted passengers represents an extremely low-risk flight. As the number of PreCheck vetted passengers grows on a flight, the collective risk of a flight increases.

Yet more can be done. Anything that the TSA can do to increase the number of PreCheck vetted passengers being screened makes the entire air system more secure, which benefits everyone. This is because it permits TSA officers to focus their attention on the remaining non-PreCheck vetted passengers, who are in the middle category. By reducing TSA officer distraction in this way, it mitigates the situation for the TSA and for air travelers.

Could the share of passengers screened through PreCheck expedited screening lines be increased to 80%? This would be a game changer for airline security. It would probably require offering PreCheck at no cost to anyone willing to undergo the background check. If so, it would mean more assurances that back-end information would be kept secure.

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