Remember the days of open airports?

Nonticketed visitors are meeting flyers at some gates, but risks and TSA resources must be considered

By SHELDON H. JACOBSON

There was a time when anyone could pass through an airport security checkpoint and greet visitors at the gate. Some airports have begun to reopen their terminals to nontravellers, including Philadelphia International Airport, with its recently launched PHL Wingate Pass.

Neither DFW International nor Love Field permits nontravellers to enter the secure side of the airport. Which is a better idea? Are there unforeseen risks involved that are being missed?

The Transportation Security Administration screened over 800 million people at airport security checkpoints in 2023, an increase of nearly 13% compared with 2022. This upward trend is likely to continue. As these numbers increase, the TSA is strained to meet this demand while keeping the time spent waiting at checkpoints to a minimum, as 20 minutes for most PreCheck passengers and 30 minutes for all other travelers to permit such visitors into the secure side of airports.

Yet the TSA would need to screen such people much as they do with travelers. How can such an increase in volume be managed? Increased concession spending translates into higher revenue for airports. Such nontravellers would also need to park, adding more parking revenue for airports. The economics tilt in favor of airports to permit such visitors.

Travelers make their way toward a TSA security checkpoint inside Terminal C at DFW International Airport. Neither DFW Airport nor Dallas Love Field permits nontravellers to enter the secure side of the airport. Judges Sheldon Jacobson. Which route is better? Are there unforeseen risks involved that are being missed?

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First, allow only PreCheck- vetted people the opportunity to pass through airport security checkpoints when not traveling. This would provide an added benefit for people to enter PreCheck. Since PreCheck passengers pass through expedited security lanes, which move more quickly than enhanced screening lanes, the impact on waiting times would be small, and effectively managed by how many such lanes are open.

Second, such nontravellers will be restricted to a maximum of one small carry-on item, like a purse, backpack or sports bag. This would keep the screening burden to a minimum.

Third, nontravellers must register online or on an app in advance. They should include the flight information of the person they are meeting in their registration, effectively attaching themselves to the traveler. Their credentials must also be authenticated using the Credential Authentication Technology-2 (CAT-2), which includes biometric facial recognition.

The potential benefits to airports (with increased revenue), the TSA (providing added value to PreCheck- enrolled passengers) and travelers (meeting family or business associates at the gate) all give value to making such a change.

Not all airports may wish to participate, nor would their airport security footprint be able to accommodate such a policy change. Moreover, the TSA will always hold first discretion to approve or deny a request by a person wishing to enter the secure side of an airport as a nontraveller. For example, if a nontraveller attempts to attach himself to a high-risk traveler, the request would be legitimately scrutinized, and likely denied. Yet denying all airports and all travelers with a one-size-fits-all policy never makes sense.

Airports have already begun to allow nontravellers into the secure side of the airport. Besides Philadelphia International, other large airports such as Minneapolis-St. Paul and Orlando International Airports have introduced similar programs. To date, there have been no incidents that warrant concern.

Permitting nontravellers into the secure side of airports makes sense; provided the appropriate procedures are followed. The potential benefits for such a policy change to all stakeholders make it something that we should see at more airports in 2024 and beyond.

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