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TSA airport delays: How partial government shutdown is affecting NY

By Newsday Staff

Transportation Security Agency employees working without pay amid a partial government shutdown are calling out from work, causing flyers to brace for long lines and delays at airport checkpoints around the country and in New York.

Staffing shortages have reached their peak in recent days, more than six weeks after Congress stopped funding Homeland Security, which oversees the TSA. Monday marked the highest TSA agent callout rate - 10.22% - at all airports nationwide, a Department of Homeland Security spokesperson said via email.

Transportation experts and officials have been urging passengers to allot extra time for long lines at TSA checkpoints. And while, Wednesday, some airports in the New York region seemed to be spared those longer security lines, the Port Authority warned about "very long wait times" at some checkpoints due to TSA agent callouts.

Just over 30% of TSA agents called out at Kennedy Airport on Tuesday, a DHS spokesperson said.

Major airports elsewhere have reported even more severe shortages of TSA agents in recent days, according to DHS.

More than 40% of security officials failed to appear at William P. Hobby Airport in Houston on Tuesday. That same day, just over a third of TSA agents called out of work at both Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport and Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport. That nationwide figure dropped slightly the following day.

At Kennedy, Denver tourists Elina Davidoff, 48, an optometrist, and her husband, Ilya, 55, who is retired from FedEx, arrived at Terminal 5 an hour earlier than they would ordinarily after learning about the staffing shortages.

The couple said they would have preferred having just a bit more time exploring New York City instead of arriving early.

"I don't want to wait in line for too long," Elina Davidoff said. "I want to spend the time doing something else."

That extra hour, it turned out, was not necessary. It took them less than five minutes "to get through TSA," Davidoff later told Newsday via text.

Nevertheless, the Port Authority, which operates five major airports in New York and New Jersey, including Kennedy and LaGuardia, warned that the partial government shutdown has impacted both TSA and U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents at its airports.

Shortages of these federal workers "over the last several days" have resulted in "very long wait times at certain checkpoints," a Port Authority spokesperson said in an email to Newsday.

"We've deployed additional customer care staff into terminals to help manage queues, assist passengers, and

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keep people moving as efficiently as possible," the spokesperson said. They added passengers should still "plan ahead and check our airport websites and their airline apps for the latest, real-time wait times and flight information before heading to the airport."

Passengers at Long Island MacArthur Airport hardly noticed staffing shortages on Wednesday. Patchogue-native Lenny Smith flew from Raleigh, North Carolina, on Breeze Airways to avoid potentially longer wait times at Kennedy Airport.

"You can go right through" smaller airports, Smith told NewsdayTV at MacArthur Wednesday. "It only took about 10 minutes to get through."

The security checkpoint at MacArthur was running "efficiently" on Wednesday, airport Commissioner Rob Schneider said in an email via Caroline Smith, the spokeswoman for the Town of Islip, which owns and operates the transportation hub.

Schneider added the airport is "beyond grateful to the commitment of the TSA staff." Smith said the town and airport would not comment on TSA staffing levels.

In a statement, a Homeland Security spokesperson pinned the shortages on the "Democrats' reckless DHS shutdown" that has left TSA officers without a paycheck. Airport security agents endured a similar financial strain last fall, when the longest government shutdown in the nation's history led the FAA to order some airports to reduce the number of flights.

Since Feb. 22, Democrats in Congress have refused to fund Homeland Security until the department reforms Immigration and Customs Enforcement operations following the fatal shootings of two American citizens in Minnesota during the Trump administration's deportation crackdown, Newsday previously reported. Republicans blocked a bill Senate Democrats proposed to pay TSA workers, who are considered essential workers, and fund other agencies under DHS while denying funds to ICE.

In an interview on Fox News's "Fox and Friends," acting Deputy TSA Administrator Adam Stahl said if Congress does not fund DHS in the coming weeks "it's not hyperbole to suggest that we may have to quite literally shut down airports, particularly smaller ones if callout rates go up."

The TSA and DHS did not immediately respond to Newsday's inquiry regarding Stahl's comments.

"Many TSA officers cannot pay their rent, buy food, or afford to put gas in their cars - forcing them to call out sick from work," the DHS spokesperson said. "Now, Americans are facing HOURS long waits at airports across the country. Democrats must reopen DHS now."

Forcing airport security officers to work without pay is "a big problem" for national security, Michael Canders, an associate professor of aviation at Farmingdale State College, told NewsdayTV. Those still working checkpoints could be "distracted" due to financial strain and "feeling the pressure" of low staffing levels.

"There needs to be provisions to make sure these critical workers are sustained during these periods," Canders

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said. "For crying out loud, get this fixed because it's inconveniencing a lot of people, but more importantly these TSA agents who should be valued federal workers, they shouldn't be treated like this."

Even though they aren't getting a paycheck, most TSA agents continue to perform their duties, officials said.

"We are grateful to our federal employees who continue working during this challenging time," the Port Authority spokesperson said. "We thank those who work each day without a paycheck, helping to keep our airports running."

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