

Flip-flop on air marshal schedules

Air marshals will continue to fly on international, cross-U.S. trips

July 30 -- After MSNBC.com reported the new policy, the Transportation Security Administration said it would immediately begin scheduling air marshals back on cross-country and international flights. NBC's Pete Williams reports.

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WASHINGTON, July 30 — In an apparent reversal of policy, the Transportation Security Administration will immediately begin scheduling air marshals back on cross-country and international flights, MSNBC.com has learned. The move comes less than 24 hours after MSNBC.com reported that air marshals were being pulled from those flights because of budget problems associated with the costs of overnight lodging for the marshals.

THE DEPARTMENT of Homeland Security on Wednesday blamed the confusion on a mixup in communication and said the department had been working with air marshal officials on Monday to correct the situation.

"America should know that every air marshal that we have is being deployed, and additional resources are being directed to that very critical mission," Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge said Wednesday in a speech. Part of the plan to add resources includes a recall of 100 air marshals now doing other jobs with TSA, a spokesman for the said.

WashPost: New hijack warnings

The dropping of marshals from flights that many experts consider to be at the highest risk of attack came to light Tuesday when several air marshals contacted by MSNBC.com confirmed that they were alerted via a "text message" on their TSA-issued cell phones to check their schedules for changes.

The marshals found that, beginning Friday, they had not been scheduled for any flights that would require them to stay away from home overnight. That meant no air marshal coverage on international or cross-country flights, the very kind targeted in the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Dems renew call for security funding

The move to pull marshals from those flights was particularly disturbing to some because it coincided with a new high-level hijacking threat issued by the Department of Homeland Security. That warning memo said that "at least one of these attacks could be executed by the end of the summer," according to a source familiar with the document.

The TSA, which houses the air marshal program, has been under severe budgetary constraints, forcing cutbacks in several areas, including laying off of federal airport screeners and the recently announced suspension of advanced Phase II training for its agents, sources told MSNBC.com. The move to cut out flights requiring air marshals to stay overnight stemmed from those same budget problems, MSNBC.com was told by an agency source.

Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., called the cuts "nonsensical" in a letter Wednesday to Secretary Ridge. Schumer's letter urges DHS to "immediately reverse reported plans to cut air marshal service on coast-to-coast and international flights ... in light of intelligence indicating that al-Qaida and other terrorist groups may have stepped up plans" to launch attacks on airlines.

Soft Target: airport security

Schumer's letter says that "according to statements by TSA officials, the "proposed cuts in the air marshal program come in response to a \$900 million budget hole at the agency."

What is 'homeland security'?

President Bush has given former Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Ridge the job of managing the government's efforts to deter and respond to terrorist attacks. "Homeland security" — protecting Americans on U.S. soil — is a complex mission requiring the coordinated work of dozens of federal, state and local agencies.

Federal air marshals are armed undercover agents deployed on U.S. airlines and authorized to use deadly force to thwart a terrorist incident. Prior to Sept. 11, 2001, there were only a few dozen marshals who flew mainly on international flights. But after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks, Congress authorized a huge increase in air marshals. From a pool of 250,000 applicants, a few thousand — the exact number is classified — were hired and given special advanced anti-terrorist training.

The program has been beset by a number of problems during its quick ramp-up from a few agents to thousands. MSNBC.com reported in June that more than 100 federal air marshals had been fired or stripped of their flight status for problems stemming from their security clearance background investigations. In addition, some air marshals were flying without having received their final security clearances, Transportation Security Administration sources said.