

Atlanta airport is going to the dogs to speed up passenger lines

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Regal, a beagle on the U.S. Customs and Border Protection canine team, checks bags at the baggage claim area of Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport in Atlanta, Georgia, Feb. 29, 2016. Regal is trained to sniff out prohibited agricultural items. Taylor Carpenter/Atlanta Journal-Constitution/TNS

ATLANTA, Ga. — As passenger lines at security checkpoints grow, Atlanta airport officials think one solution could be more screeners like Miley, Jo and Dougie.

They are part of the airport's five-dog squad of four-legged security screeners. Miguel Southwell, who manages the airport, thinks having more dog squads, also known as canine units, could help speed the flow and hold down rising wait times.

"Either additional inspectors or additional canine units — we need those right now," Southwell said. "I believe we could use about four to five more canine units or the equivalent in the number of employees."

Four-Legged Screeners, Faster Lines

The trained dogs patrol lines at screening checkpoints, sniffing for explosives or potential bomb-making ingredients on passengers and their carry-on bags.

The dogs give the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) a faster form of screening. Passengers screened by the dogs might be able to keep their jackets or shoes on or leave their laptops in bags to speed the lines.

Anthony K. Jones, the TSA's dog supervisor at the Atlanta airport, said the dogs also bring "a degree of comfort and security" to passengers.

Long lines have become an urgent problem over the last year. Waiting times at the world's busiest airports have reached as long as 52 minutes during peak travel periods.

Southwell recently said he was considering the drastic step of hiring additional security workers if the TSA cannot cut waiting times. The TSA's force of screeners is smaller now than it was five years ago and has struggled to tackle the crowds.

Southwell has since talked with the TSA and believes it will hire more employees, bring on more canine teams and add new technology to improve the process of getting passengers through security.

During the recent holiday rush, extra dogs from Fort Lauderdale, Florida, helped at the Atlanta airport, Southwell said, but those dogs were returned afterward.

Now Southwell is worried about the summer rush. He wrote a letter to the TSA that said airport officials are "dreading" long waiting times.

On really busy travel days, such as the Sunday after Thanksgiving, the TSA screens as many as 88,000 passengers in a day at the Atlanta airport.

Ruff Work

The TSA has five passenger screening dogs at the Atlanta airport. They are Miley, a chocolate Labrador retriever; Jo, a German shorthaired pointer; Dougie, a yellow Lab; and Balou and Betty, both black Labs.

The TSA doesn't like to use pointed-eared dogs like German shepherds, which can seem threatening to people.

There's already money to train four more dogs to work at the Atlanta airport. Other TSA dogs are used to screen cargo.

The dogs work a half-hour to one hour at a time at the main security checkpoint. That is where they sniff passengers and their bags and the air for any hint of explosive materials.

"It's tough work," Jones said.

"As many people as Atlanta pushes past these dogs, they're trying to catch each one. They're pretty exhausted," he said. "You can see it... (The dog's) tail is not wagging like it used to be. He's dropping his head a little bit more."

The dogs wear belts with "Do not pet" on them.

Other dogs and cats can be a big potential distraction for these four-legged screeners.

TSA tells passengers with pets in carry-on carriers to not get in the line if there is a passenger screening dog there. They should instead head to another checkpoint.

When travelers are afraid of dogs or just don't want to be sniffed by one, the handler can make the dog sit as passengers walk by. The dogs can still sniff the air for illegal substances.

Basic Training In Texas

Each team of dogs can cost as much as \$220,000 in the first year. That pays for the handler's salary, as well as training, certification, veterinarian services, kenneling and food for the dogs. They also need other equipment like a climate-controlled vehicle for the dogs' break periods at work.

For the dogs, basic training takes place at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas.

"All dogs are not cut out for this," Jones said. "Some dogs wash out."

The training is followed by a period where the dogs get used to the airport and get tested to see if they detect training aids. Dogs learn the area where they are expected to work.

A spokesperson for the TSA compares the checkpoints where the dogs work to offices where people work.

The dogs work for rewards like tennis balls and rubber toys. Their favorite reward is hearing a "Good boy!" or "Good girl!" from their handlers.

When not on duty, the dogs go home with their handlers. But they are not treated like pets. They typically stay in kennels when off the job.

If being home is nonstop play time, "the dog is not going to want to work," Jones said. "Their fun is working."