



Memorandum

**U.S. Department of
Transportation**

Office of the Secretary
of Transportation
Office of Inspector General

Subject: **ACTION:** Report on TSA Implementation of
Veterans' Preference in Screener Hiring
Transportation Security Administration
AV-2003-005

Date: December 11, 2002

From: Alexis M. Stefani 
Principal Assistant Inspector General
for Auditing and Evaluation

Reply to
Attn. of: JA-1

To: Admiral James M. Loy
Under Secretary of Transportation for Security

As requested by the Fiscal Year 2002 Supplemental Appropriations Act passed on August 2, 2002, we are reporting on the Transportation Security Administration's (TSA) implementation of veterans' preference in its hiring of security screeners. The Aviation and Transportation Security Act (Security Act) requires TSA to give a preference in hiring security screeners "if the individual is a member or former member of the armed forces and if the individual is entitled, under statute, to retired, retirement or retainer pay on account of service as a member of the armed forces."

Overall, we found TSA has done a good job of hiring a high proportion of veterans; however, there are a number of actions TSA can take to improve the process. To ensure more consistency in hiring baggage screeners, we are recommending that TSA formalize its policy for using veterans' preference in hiring screeners and that the formal policy consider competing staffing requirements and require better documentation on hiring decisions.

We limited our review to the 55 airports where TSA had completed its hiring of passenger screeners as of the end of August. TSA's hiring procedures resulted in a screener workforce that includes a proportionally high number of veterans. At the 55 airports, 2,804 (41 percent) of the 6,806 screeners TSA hired were veterans. This compares with 33 percent for the Department of Transportation as a whole and 26 percent for the Executive Branch.

For the airports we reviewed, 54 percent of the veterans and 54 percent of the nonveterans who passed the assessment were offered jobs. Among females who passed the assessment, a higher percentage of veterans (74 percent) were offered jobs than nonveterans (64 percent). However, as a result of TSA procedures and competing staffing requirements, all veterans who passed the assessment did not receive job offers. Competing staffing requirements included the need to hire a screener workforce that is at least one-third female and TSA's promise that incumbent screeners would be hired as long as they passed the assessment process.

There was an opportunity for TSA to hire more veterans, but we could not determine who because in the majority of cases documentation was not available to support why an individual veteran who passed the assessment did not get hired. However, in some cases, veterans were not hired because of competing staffing requirements. In other cases, veterans applied only for the limited number of supervisory jobs, which filled up quickly.

Scope and Methodology

We reviewed TSA's hiring procedures in use from April to August 2002. We limited our review to 55 airports where TSA had completed its hiring of passenger screeners as of the end of August. TSA hired 6,806 screeners, including 2,804 veterans, for the 55 airports. We analyzed the data from the hiring at the 55 airports and reviewed the records of veterans who applied for screener jobs with TSA. From the 55 airports, we judgmentally selected 3 airports for a more detailed review. At the 3 airports, we reviewed records of 80 veterans from 780 veterans who passed the assessment process but were placed in the ready pool.

The audit was conducted in accordance with Government Auditing Standards prescribed by the Comptroller General of the United States. For our analysis we relied to a large extent on data provided by TSA. For each airport, TSA provided a list of individuals who passed the assessment, including their veteran status, sex, position applied for, and whether they were hired or assigned to the ready pool. The data provided by TSA were the basis for our selection of the 3 airports and 80 individual records for review. Additionally, TSA is a newly formed agency, and we have not tested the effectiveness of the controls over TSA's personnel data system.

Background

The Security Act language extends preference to more veterans than is provided for in Title 5, United States Code. Title 5 only provides veterans' preference for disabled veterans and for veterans who served during specific time periods. TSA's hiring procedures have awarded veterans' preference to individuals who

would qualify under either the Security Act or Title 5, and the TSA procedures did not distinguish between Security Act and Title 5 veterans.

TSA established a two-step assessment process to ensure that all personnel hired as screeners meet the requirements detailed in the Security Act and possess the capability to become effective screeners. The Security Act requires that screeners be U.S. citizens, be proficient in English, possess a high school diploma or general equivalency diploma, and possess basic aptitudes and physical abilities for the screener positions. The first step in TSA's hiring process is for the applicant to complete an online application and questionnaire. The questionnaire is used to eliminate unqualified applicants and identify, among other things, applicants who are eligible for the TSA veterans' preference.

The second step in the process is an in-person assessment of the qualified applicants. The assessment includes a computerized test, physical tests,¹ and a medical examination. All of the assessment tests are graded as pass or fail. Those who fail any part of the assessment are not offered a job.² Those who pass all assessment tests are either offered a job or placed in a "ready pool" from which further jobs *may* be filled. While being placed in the ready pool does not constitute a rejection, it is also not a guarantee of future employment.

TSA Hiring Procedures Resulted in a Screener Workforce That Includes a Proportionally High Number of Veterans

TSA hired a significant number of veterans as security screeners. At the 55 airports we reviewed, 2,804 (41 percent) of the 6,806 screeners TSA hired were veterans. This compares with 33 percent for the Department of Transportation as a whole and 26 percent for the Executive Branch.

For the airports we reviewed, 54 percent of the veterans and 54 percent of the nonveterans who passed the assessment were offered jobs. But when we compared the hiring of veterans and nonveterans within each gender, a preference for hiring veterans became apparent. For example, among females who passed the assessment, a higher percentage of veterans (74 percent) were offered jobs than nonveterans (64 percent). Likewise, among males who passed the assessment, a higher percentage of veterans (52 percent) were offered jobs than nonveterans (48 percent).

¹ Two tests of the applicant's physical ability were used. The first tested the applicant's ability to lift and carry baggage weighing up to 40 pounds. The second tested the applicant's ability to recognize objects by touch.

² Otherwise qualified applicants with medical conditions were placed in a "medical hold" while they were given an opportunity to provide documentation that they are capable of performing the job.

TSA Needs to Establish a Formal Policy for Awarding Veterans' Preference

TSA has not formalized its veterans' preference policy and, since the beginning of May, has changed its procedures for providing veterans' preference. TSA representatives used a series of e-mails, verbal instructions, and informal documents called business rules to communicate procedures to the hiring contractor.

TSA initially planned to roster all the personnel who passed the assessment process for each airport. Under this procedure, TSA waited until enough applicants had passed the assessment to fill the job openings at the airport. TSA then prepared a roster to rank all the applicants who passed, and it made hiring decisions based on applicant rankings. Using a roster allowed TSA to award preference to all veterans who passed the assessment. However, TSA determined that it was not feasible to quickly hire and deploy screeners using an airport-by-airport roster. TSA hired from a roster at only one of the airports we reviewed.

To expedite the hiring of screeners, TSA adopted the procedure of offering jobs to the individuals who passed all assessment tests on a "first completed" basis until all the screener jobs at an airport were filled. Under the expedited hiring procedures, TSA's veterans' preference policy consisted of scheduling only veterans during the first 2 days the assessment center for each airport was open. This allowed veterans an opportunity to be the first to complete the assessment process, thereby giving them an advantage. However, if a veteran could not make it to the assessment center until later, all the screener jobs may have been filled for an airport before the veteran was assessed. In addition, TSA reserved some of the screener jobs for incumbent screeners, who were not scheduled to be assessed until TSA was ready to federalize the airport. TSA used these hiring procedures at 54 of the airports we reviewed.

At the end of August, TSA instituted another change to give preference to incumbent screeners who are veterans at smaller airports (Categories 3 and 4). Next in line for preference at these small airports are all other incumbent screeners, followed by veterans who are not incumbent screeners. According to TSA officials, this change was made to guarantee jobs to all incumbent screeners who passed the assessment. At the smaller airports, so many incumbent screeners were passing the assessment that TSA could have been forced to hire more screeners than were needed if it hired veterans before incumbent screeners.

The changes in procedures and a lack of formal policies led to misunderstandings. For example, during a visit to one of TSA's job fairs, we found that the personnel who were scheduling applicants for the assessment center were not aware of the TSA policy to schedule only veterans during the first 2 days of testing. We

brought this situation to the attention of TSA management, which promised to investigate.

In our opinion, the lack of a formal policy resulted in inconsistent treatment of job applicants. The lack of such a formal policy to date is understandable, given the fast pace needed to hire such a large number of screeners in such a short time. But it is now time for TSA to formalize its hiring policies to ensure consistency for future hiring needs.

Competing Staffing Requirements Caused TSA to Hire Nonveterans Over Veterans

While we found that TSA was providing veterans a preference in the hiring process, veterans who passed the assessment were not guaranteed job offers. Competing staffing requirements influenced the TSA hiring decisions. Veterans who passed the assessment did not always get hired because TSA also needed to give preference to female applicants and incumbent screeners. In some cases, veterans applied only for the limited number of supervisory jobs. Once those jobs were filled, the veterans who applied only for supervisory jobs were placed in the ready pool.

Female Screeners TSA's goal is to have a passenger screener workforce that is at least one-third female to comply with the requirement of same-sex hand-wanding. However, this goal affects the overall proportion of veterans offered jobs. For the 55 airports in our review, TSA needed to hire about 2,300 females to meet the minimum requirement. TSA offered jobs to 2,368 female screeners (34 percent of all job offers), but most of the females who passed the assessment were not veterans. Of the 497 female veterans who passed the assessment, 370 were offered jobs (74 percent).

Incumbent Screeners Another competing requirement was TSA's promise that incumbent screeners would be hired as long as they passed the assessment process. TSA made this promise to keep the incumbent screeners from quitting and to provide the screener workforce with experienced personnel. We checked the job experience reported by male nonveterans who were offered jobs instead of veterans. Of 2,150 male nonveterans offered jobs at the 55 airports, 356 (17 percent) were incumbent screeners.

Type of Position Applied For The type of screener position that veterans applied for also affected the proportion of veterans who received job offers. A high percentage of veterans applied for the limited number of supervisory jobs. Of all job offers, 27 percent were offers for supervisory jobs. Under the procedures in

effect for the 55 airports we reviewed,³ a qualified applicant for a supervisory job that had already been filled would not automatically be offered a basic screener position. At the 55 airports, 60 percent of the veterans placed in the ready pool had applied for supervisory jobs. TSA hired veterans to fill more than half (51 percent) of the supervisory jobs at the 55 airports.

As discussed below, we cannot say that the three competing staffing requirements, to hire female screeners, to hire incumbent screeners, and to fill the limited number of lead and supervisory positions, explain all exceptions to the veterans' preference, because of the limited documentation.

TSA Has Limited Documentation to Show Why Individual Veterans Were Not Offered Jobs

During our review of the veterans' files, we found no record of why TSA offered jobs to some applicants who passed the assessment and assigned other applicants to the ready pool.

We reviewed records for a judgmental sample of 80 of the 780 veterans who passed the assessment process but were placed in the ready pool at 3 airports. We were not able to determine in all 80 individual cases why veterans were not hired because TSA did not maintain documentation to support its decisions to place applicants in the ready pool. TSA's records on these actions were simply not conclusive enough for us to make definitive determinations on an individual basis.

From the available data, we attempted to reconstruct TSA hiring decisions and generally found them consistent with stated TSA procedures. We could only infer why veterans were placed in the ready pool instead of being offered jobs immediately. Six of the 80 records indicated the processing had been temporarily held to document or resolve a medical item before an offer of employment could be made. Although the medical hold was cleared, the delay meant the veteran did not complete the assessment before many jobs were filled.

Recommendations

Based on our findings, we recommend that TSA formalize its policy for awarding veterans' preference. The policy should:

1. Provide guidelines for addressing competing staffing requirements, such as the hiring goals to accomplish same-sex hand-wanding.

³ TSA subsequently changed its policy so those applicants for supervisory positions that had been filled would automatically be eligible for available positions at lower levels.

2. Include sufficient instructions to ensure that the policy for veterans' preference is uniformly administered and individual hiring decisions are documented.

A draft of this report was provided to TSA officials. TSA concurred with our recommendations and promised corrective action. In accordance with the Department of Transportation Order 8000.1C, we would appreciate receiving your written comments on this report within 30 days. Please also indicate the specific actions taken or planned and the target dates for completion.

We appreciate the courtesies and cooperation of the TSA representatives during this review. If you have any questions please feel free to contact me at (202) 366-1992 or Robin K. Hunt, Deputy Assistant Inspector General for Transportation Security and Hazardous Materials at (415) 744-3090.

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