

Local business travelers sound off on security

December 20, 2010

Flying up to 125,000 miles this year alone, both internationally and between seven company locations across the U.S., Electronic Recyclers International CEO John Shegerian is accustomed to airport security checks.

In fact, new screening procedures implemented last month by the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) involving X-ray-like scans and frisking are not a bother for Shegerian when compared to threats from terrorists such as Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the man accused of trying to bring down a passenger jet bound for Detroit last Christmas with explosives hidden in his underwear.

“These are all small inconveniences for our overwhelming freedom,” said Shegerian, adding that the routine at Fresno Yosemite International is actually faster now after the two-year renovation of its security checkpoint areas. “I think overall the TSA has done a very great job at protecting the security of the country and our people.”

Shegerian said well-seasoned travelers such as himself don’t feel much of the same anxiety as many first- or second-time flyers who aren’t accustomed to the necessary procedures, such as body scans.

But for many of the 24 million or so Americans taking to the skies this holiday season, concerns are only increasing about the controversial new body imaging scanners and security procedures.

Last month an estimated 100,000 or so people were expected to travel from Fresno Yosemite International Airport, one of 70 airports nationwide now equipped with the scanner units meant to reveal explosives or weapons hidden beneath the clothes.

Passengers are also directed to remove their shoes and certain belongings from their bags before they board any of the airport’s 40 daily departures, while some may be asked to submit to pat downs.

The TSA said just 3% of air travelers have received pat downs so far, administered by someone of the same gender and only for those who refuse the body imaging scans or set off metal detectors.

For some, those facts are still not very reassuring. Harry Harris, president of Fresno home health agency HealthCare California, is one of those who sides with 45.7% of respondents in a Business Journal Web poll believing the pat down procedures go too far in probing passengers.

Harris remarked on the efficiency of security procedures overseas often conducted by personnel from private firms, examples that the U.S. could learn from to prevent a system in which even pilots and flight attendants are screened for weapons or explosives, he said.

“The Japanese, Germans, Koreans and Chinese are very good. They are very observant and they have much success in psychological profiling,” said Harris, who flies an average of 120,000 miles a year to places as far as Argentina, Australia, Syria and China.

Flying at least once a week, Brian Thome, CEO of Edeniq in Visalia, periodically travels to the biofuel technology company’s subsidiary in Brazil, or to see family in Minneapolis.

In his experience, especially during his six-month tenure with Edeniq, Thome said despite TSA’s claims of a smoother process, the airport safety checks simply have not gotten any easier or effective since the new procedures were put in place.

“For the day-to-day business traveler, they say it’s meant to speed things up,” Thome said. “I’ve been through it twice and I’ve stood and watched other people have to go through it. It does not speed anything up. It slows it down.”

About 450 scanner units have been deployed across the country since March, with Fresno Yosemite International using a millimeter wave device that bounces electromagnetic waves off the body to create a black-and-white, three-dimensional image. Other airports employ a backscatter machine that projects low-level X-ray beams, producing a reflection of the body displayed on a monitor.

TSA plans to expand the roster to 1,000 machines next year, escalating fears of radiation discharged by the devices. However, a 2009 study by Johns Hopkins University states that a person would need the equivalent of 516 screenings from a TSA scanner a day to reach a dose equal to that which Americans receive annually from sources such as radon gas at home and medical and dental X-rays.

Further concerns over privacy issues were stoked by a report of 100 improperly stored images from a similar machine in a Florida courthouse leaking out to the Web. However, TSA insists that all such images taken by airport units are automatically deleted after being cleared by a remotely located security officer.

The scanners were purchased with funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act at about \$170,000 each.

At Fresno Yosemite International, where passenger numbers have increased 18% since 2000, the body scanner was installed in August after a two-year renovation project to upgrade the airport’s security area.

Original URL:

<http://www.thebusinessjournal.com/transportation/7624-local-business-travelers-sound-off-on-security>