

Staff Shortage Lengthening Dulles Airport Passport Lines

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Body

A **shortage** of Immigration and Naturalization Service agents at **Dulles** International **Airport** has led to longer-than-usual waits at **passport** control for arriving international passengers, **airport** and INS officials said.

At times in the past two months, passengers have waited so long during 90-minute stopovers that they have missed connections with domestic flights, an airline representative said. Arriving passengers also have been held on their planes or on the **airport**'s mobile lounges until the crowded immigration area cleared out.

Airline officials say they are concerned that waits will grow even longer when they add more international flights in May for the busy summer travel season.

"If it's this bad now, what's it going to be like then?" said Dick DeiTos, executive director of the Metropolitan Washington Airlines Committee, made up of airlines that use **Dulles** and Reagan National **airports**.

The inspector positions, seen as steppingstones to other law enforcement jobs, often have high turnover rates, said Bill Shaw, a spokesman for the INS's Washington district office.

The INS has also been losing people to recruitment efforts for programs begun after the Sept. 11 terrorism acts, including the rapidly expanded sky marshal program. The INS is in the process of hiring 12 additional inspectors at **Dulles** and is trying to recruit more, he said.

"We're more than willing to admit we're not meeting that goal [of 45-minute clearances] on some flights right now," Shaw said.

Kimberly Weissman, an INS spokesman, said the problem is surfacing at **airports** nationwide. She said the INS is recruiting more inspectors but that it takes six to eight months for them to be trained and begin work. That means the **shortage** probably will continue into late summer, she said.

At that rate, DeiTos said, the waits at **Dulles** will worsen through the busy summer season unless inspectors are transferred from other **airports**.

DeiTos said the problem was especially bad over the Christmas and New Year's holidays, when it took some **Dulles** passengers an hour and 40 minutes to clear immigration and customs. Fewer people are flying now, DeiTos

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said, but domestic flights are still being delayed an average of eight to 17 minutes while they wait for connecting international passengers caught up in immigration.

James A. Wilding, president of the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority, which operates Dulles and National, said the waits at Dulles's passport control are usually no longer than 15 minutes. But in the past two months, he said, lines have grown longer than ever.

"It's distressing to us," Wilding said. "Our sense is that the INS people on the scene are as pained by it as we are and are working hard. But so far, they don't seem to have been able to get on top of it."

Federal law requires that INS agents clear international passengers within 45 minutes. Shaw said problems have arisen because only 42 of the 71 immigration inspector positions at Dulles are filled.

"We're severely understaffed," Shaw said.

John White, a spokesman for Baltimore-Washington International Airport, said waits at BWI's passport control are no longer than usual. Chris Bentley, a spokesman for the INS's Baltimore office, said 11 of BWI's 13 INS inspector positions are filled.

The waits aren't always long at Dulles. On Wednesday, when four international flights arrived between 3:30 and 5:30 p.m., passengers reported waiting no more than 15 minutes. But DeiTos said the lines grow during busier times, especially on Fridays and Sundays between 3 and 5 p.m.

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