

# John F. Kennedy International Airport Multi-Agency Security Review Team



November 16 , 2016

The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo  
Governor of the State of New York  
Albany, N.Y. 12224

The Honorable Jeh C. Johnson  
Secretary of Homeland Security  
Washington, D.C. 20528

Dear Governor Cuomo and Secretary Johnson:

Pursuant to your directive for recommendations, the New York State Governor's Office coordinated a review of the events of August 14, 2016 in which mistaken reports of an active shooter caused panic and self-evacuations in Terminals 1, 2 and 8 of John F. Kennedy International Airport (JFK). During the review, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) participated and assisted with information relating to TSA regulations, policies, training, and active shooter procedures. The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey (PANYNJ) and the New York City Police Department (NYPD) also participated in the review process.

In short, we have found that our existing security protocols and systems do not reflect the new, changing reality at airports. As the threat of terrorism has increased, both the number and variety of security agencies have increased. There are now federal, state, local and private security forces deployed at various terminals throughout JFK. While the number of security personnel has increased, the coordination and standard protocols for operations have not adjusted to the increased presence. This is aggravated by the varying levels of training and sophistication of the different security agents. Security personnel can be highly trained or minimally trained, armed or unarmed, private agents or government agents, peace officers or police officers. There is an urgent need for a joint operating procedure and protocol that coordinates all forces, otherwise – as we saw on August 14<sup>th</sup> – the variety of forces can be counterproductive.

Recent events have created a general state of heightened anxiety experienced by passengers, airport employees and security forces. People are now "on edge" in airports<sup>1</sup>. This compounds the effects of the lack of adequate security operating protocols.

On August 14<sup>th</sup> this heightened anxiety caused overreaction. The overreaction quickly escalated and led to a group panic. Airport employees and security personnel, rather than calming the customers, increased the panic by their response which led to a mass evacuation of the terminals. In this case, although thousands of people participated in an uncontrolled immediate evacuation, there were no significant injuries. However, the danger posed by a panicked mass of people fleeing for their lives cannot be overstated.

Given these concerns, we recommend a new model with four elements. First, a unified command structure that physically and organizationally combines all security forces on the

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<sup>1</sup> It bears noting that on August 28, 2016, a similar event occurred at LAX, showing that this was not an isolated incident

premises with a standard joint operating protocol and physical command center. Second, all security stakeholders should be trained to a minimum standard, providing training on operating procedures, crowd management and observation skills. This will involve additional training for some agencies including the PANYNJ and the TSA. We recommend these public agencies also be trained to a joint operating procedure and protocol so that there is a uniform standard response and each agency is aware of how the other agencies will respond. Third, we recommend that for the first time in any airport all airport employees will also be trained in active violence response procedures, insider-threat identification, and crowd management. Airport employees outnumber security personnel and their response in an emergency can either complicate or facilitate the proper outcome. Fourth, a mass evacuation plan must be developed for each JFK terminal.

We believe the JFK incident is the first to manifest the new factors and realities of airport security in these times of heightened concern. We do not believe these factors are unique to JFK but currently exist to some degree at all airports nationwide. The JFK experience and our response could serve to develop a new model for responding to emergencies in our nation's airports.

Below please find a summary of facts and our full recommendations.

## **I. Summary of Events**

On Sunday, August 14, 2016 at 9:33pm, a call was received by the NYPD 911 call center reporting a large disturbance at JFK's Terminal 8. Moments before that call, in Terminal 8, patrons in the Juan Valdez Café were loudly celebrating the Olympics victory of Jamaican track star Usain Bolt. A review of videotape from the incident shows passengers in the terminal panicking immediately after the celebration. The initial 911 call was soon followed by additional calls, on-site reports and social media accounts, indicating shots had been fired in Terminal 8. Port Authority of New York and New Jersey police officers (PAPD) already in the terminal were notified of an alleged active shooter and drew their weapons before advancing towards where they believed the shooter was located. TSA agents, aware of the disturbance and seeing PAPD officers with their weapons drawn, began to run with passengers from the public area of Terminal 8 towards the Exit/Known Crew Member entrance. Seeing TSA agents running away and PAPD with guns drawn created obvious fear and panic. Immediately thereafter, passengers began a self-evacuation of the terminal. By 9:38pm the first PAPD tour commander arrived on scene, witnessed passengers self-evacuating the terminal, and initiated the Active Shooter Protocol.

Soon after the initial reports of a shooter in Terminal 8 were made, additional reports of a shooter in Terminal 1 and 2 were received by 911 operators. In Terminal 1, upon being notified of a suspected active shooter, Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) officers took a "hard stand" and drew their weapons, which caused passengers in the Federal Inspection Service (FIS) area to panic. Some passengers self-evacuated the FIS through emergency exits onto the tarmac. Others returned to the gate area and boarded a Korean Air airplane where airline employees deployed its emergency evacuation chutes, producing a "popping" sound that may have been mistaken for gunfire. Over the seventy minutes that followed the first 911 call, 109 calls were received by 911 operators indicating that there was an active shooter or that shots had been fired.

In all, 275 police officers responded to these 911 calls, which included 88 PAPD officers and 187 NYPD police officers. Law enforcement and security personnel responded in a timely

manner to the active shooter report as the situation unfolded. After a preliminary investigation, officers cleared the affected areas of the terminal, K-9 units were dispatched to check abandoned luggage and detectives were assigned to review video footage and interview witnesses. Flight arrivals were suspended between 9:40pm and 11:50pm and the Federal Aviation Administration issued a nationwide "ground hold" on flights to JFK until shortly after 11pm when the PANYNJ issued a public statement indicating that there was no evidence of an active shooter or of shots being fired. Once authorized to reopen the terminals, the TSA and the PANYNJ employees, including the PAPD, screened evacuated passengers and their property using TSA proprietary K-9 teams and resumed normal operations. In the course of this incident, eight individuals were reported to have suffered minor injuries.

## **II. Recommendations**

**We have four recommendations:**

**1. Establish a single, unified operations center responsible for overseeing and directing security operations for the entire airport and facilitating shared communications:** JFK has been described as several separate airports, reflecting the different geography, layout and management of each terminal (six passenger and eighteen cargo). Some terminal and cargo tenants, through the use of Exclusive Area Agreements (EAAs), are responsible for providing security personnel and implementing federal security regulations and protocols. Terminal 4 does not have an EAA and PAPD is responsible for all security activities at this terminal. In addition, PAPD is responsible for the security in 14 of the 18 cargo facilities and the airport perimeter. The terminals currently have separate Local Security Operations Centers (LSOCs) and, in some instances, the LSOC for one terminal is physically located in a different terminal. Law enforcement does not have a standing presence in LSOCs, and does not have direct access to terminal security camera feeds. As a result of this setup, during the events of August 14, PAPD officers had to go to separate locations to access security footage. While this system of dispersed LSOCs works fine during normal operations, such a framework is not adaptable to larger-scale events impacting either multiple terminals or the Airport.

Accordingly, we recommend establishing a unified command operations structure that physically and organizationally combines all security forces on the premises with a standard joint operating protocol and physical command center. A central command center will enable law enforcement to maintain situational awareness throughout the airport at all times. The command center should have representatives from each law enforcement agency, government operated security agency, airport operations, and private security contractors to ensure that the information flows freely between all security stakeholders and have a standard operating protocol. It should have access to close-circuit television feeds and the ability to make announcements to a terminal or the entire airport from a central location. This will provide a better common operating picture, coordination and improve unity of effort during emergencies, it will also allow for better communication with the traveling public, law enforcement, airport operations and airport employees to include TSA and air carrier representation with EAAs.

**2. Coordinated training with security stakeholders:** PAPD and the TSA should jointly develop a security training regimen that incorporates all security stakeholders stationed at the airport as well as external first responders like NYPD and the New York City Fire Department. This training must focus not only on active violence response, but also on crowd management; ensuring seamless interoperable communications; event recovery; and familiarizing security stakeholders with the physical layout of the airport and terminals.

Training should include security contractors and federal, state, and local first responders to ensure a coordinated response. And it should be conducted at least annually to ensure sufficient numbers of staff members are trained, regardless of the rate of employee turnover. This training should be supplemented with exercises portraying real-life scenarios that, to the extent possible, are conducted on site.

Finally, this training should anticipate a mass self-evacuation event. As a result of the mass evacuation that occurred in this instance, secure areas were compromised, which left the terminals, tarmac and airplanes vulnerable to possible terrorist attack or other illegal conduct. Security personnel must be trained to expeditiously restore compromised secure areas and return the airport to full working order. This may include, but is not limited to, quickly recovering and re-securing sterile areas if they are breached; clearing operations areas (i.e., the tarmac) of civilians, and reuniting travelers with family, companions, and personal property.

**3. Require a coordinated security and emergency preparedness training for all airport employees:** Although there was no active shooter in this instance, this incident reinforces the need for continuous awareness training and preparation. Moreover, we recognize that airport employees play an important role in ensuring overall airport security and during emergencies. Their behavior can either complicate or facilitate the situations.

Although many airport staff members receive TSA mandated Secure Identification Area (SIDA) training, which includes active violence and insider threat components, there are many airport employees who receive no training at all. Moreover, our review determined that there is a very high turnover rate among airport staff and that they do not necessarily train for crises with law enforcement or other first responders.

All airport employees should receive training on active violence and insider threats, and evacuation procedures that includes understanding the physical layout of the terminals and airport. Employees should be trained to assist in directing the traveling public to emergency exits or secure areas during an emergency. Given the large number of airport employees, training should be done on a prioritized basis.

Panic among the traveling public was also caused or exacerbated, at least in part, by the reaction of airport employees to law enforcement personnel's response to the active shooter allegations. Accordingly, airport employees must also be trained on what to expect from law enforcement and other first responders in an emergency situation.

**4. Develop a plan for mass evacuation of JFK:** During this event, terminals were self-evacuated by patrons, employees and unarmed security personnel, and not at the direction of law enforcement. A security plan should be developed to address mass self-evacuation. This plan should include pre-identifying airport staff and training on roles and responsibilities to assist in the safe egress of the traveling public and employees as the highest priority, while maintaining the integrity of sterile and secure areas if possible. Since TSA employees are not armed law enforcement; and are trained to "Run, Hide, Fight" in the event of an active violence situation, TSA checkpoints could be left vulnerable in these situations. Having an armed law enforcement presence at those checkpoints will help maintain the integrity and security of the sterile area. There should also be a recovery plan to ensure the line between the sterile and non-sterile areas is clear after an emergency event occurs.

Finally, this plan should anticipate the need to maintain communication with airport employees and the traveling public through the use of signage, social media and direct communication platforms (for example, acquiring a mass-communication tool that enables direct messaging through cellular phones). PAPD should also develop methods of ensuring that critical information is provided to the public throughout emergency situations. For example, retaining full time Public Information Officers (PIO) or designating certain officers to serve as PIOs in emergency situations may effectively accomplish this goal.

### **III. Conclusion**

Since 9/11, the specter of terrorism has embedded itself in the national psyche and created a persistent, abiding tension that cannot be ignored. Recent terrorist attacks in transportation hubs throughout the globe have further heightened anxiety in the public. While the number and variety of airport security resources has increased to respond to this reality; coordination and standard protocols for operations should evolve as well. Coordination, collaboration, and training between local, state, and federal partners and airport personnel is absolutely fundamental to properly addressing this new paradigm.

This event, while troubling, offered a unique opportunity to study the consequences of an airport active violence emergency situation. Law enforcement and security personnel responded in a timely manner, to the active shooter report, as the situation unfolded in real time. However, as is often the case, the corresponding consequences of this type of incident can be overlooked. This event provided the opportunity to identify areas for improvement in the response, communications, and recovery aspect of an active shooter/violence incident.

We hope that this report assists your offices in developing appropriate policies and preparation to enhance airport security. We thank you for trusting us with this critical and important charge and for giving us the opportunity to lead in this review.

Respectfully,



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