Three Airports Plan to Ditch T.S.A. Agents Amid Push for Private Security (continued)

By Ryley Ober, The New York Times

The airports — Tampa International Airport, Des Moines International Airport and Charleston International Airport — plan to transition to the new voluntary public-private screening initiative, an agency spokesperson confirmed on Wednesday. The initiative, called Gold+, has been billed by the agency as an update to an existing program through which 20 U.S. airports, including San Francisco International, use private security screeners rather than federal workers. The T.S.A. first announced the new program in a mass email to staff members in May.

In the wake of recent government shutdowns, which left T.S.A. agents unpaid for months and led to long lines, airport officials in Tampa and Des Moines said they hoped using the program would reduce the risk of disruptions while allowing airports to access new screening checkpoint technology that they say would otherwise take years to obtain through the traditional federal process.

But the American Federation of Government Employees, which represents 47,000 T.S.A. agents across the country, said in a statement on Tuesday that the Trump administration's push to expand privatization of aviation security could jeopardize public safety and represented a "major departure" from the system created by Congress after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

“Changes of this magnitude should not be made behind closed doors without the input of Congress, the flying public, the local airport authorities, and T.S.A. employees themselves,” said Everett Kelley, the union’s national president. Mr. Kelley added that he believed continued privatization could pose a significant danger: “We don’t have to theorize about what that may look like because we have been through this before.”

The T.S.A. replaced a patchwork of private security at U.S. airport checkpoints after the attacks. Unlike the firms participating in the current private security program, the companies used before the attacks were not directly overseen by the federal government.

Under Gold+, private contractors would be in control of security screening functions and the screening technology itself, according to the union. The T.S.A. would continue to have regulatory oversight.

The agency did not respond to questions regarding how long the transitions would take or what the procurement process for private screening contractors would look like. But an email sent from the agency to the union’s council president on Monday, which was obtained by The New York Times, said security officers at the three airports underwent briefings this week regarding the new program and what it would mean for employees.

The email included the following transition dates: January 2027 for Des Moines, February 2027 for Charleston and May 2027 for Tampa.

In a statement, Emily Nipps, a spokesperson for the Tampa airport, said airport officials were told that any airport that applies for the new program could withdraw its application at any time before a contract is issued. Brian Mulcahy, the chief executive of the Des Moines Airport Authority, said in a statement that any

current security officers would have the option to continue working at the airport after the T.S.A. selected a screening contractor.

Mr. Mulcahy also said that federal law would ensure that pay and benefits for private screeners would be comparable with those of T.S.A. agents.

A T.S.A. spokesperson said the agency remains committed to stabilized operations and supporting employees throughout the transition at these airports.

Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International, the world's busiest airport, is undergoing an independent study to evaluate whether the airport should privatize screening. During the last shutdown, some travelers spent four hours in Atlanta's T.S.A. line.