

Under scrutiny in the skies

Critics, air marshals criticize federal program

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At 30,000 feet, they're on the domestic front lines in the war on terror.

The exact number of air marshals is classified, but critics and some marshals afraid of retaliation say the program is beset by challenges that put their lives at risk.

"We're not asking for more money," says Mike, who works as a marshal and asked not to be further identified. "We're asking to do our jobs without worrying about getting our throats cut."

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The marshals have been around for 36 years, but their ranks swelled from just 33 officers to several thousand immediately after 9/11.

And while they're supposed to travel under cover, many marshals complain their cover is regularly blown — in large part by a strict dress code that the marshals say makes it difficult to blend in with the traveling public.

"They give us high-powered weapons. They give us handcuffs, and we all have top secret clearances. But they don't trust us to go into a closet and pick our own clothes out for the flight that I am gonna be on," says Mike.

Air marshal supervisors say the dress code is not a hard and fast rule.

Report finds air marshal standards lacking

"Grossly inaccurate," says Federal Air Marshal Spokesman David Adams. "They're not required to wear business suits or look like a Secret Service agent. They're to blend into their surroundings."

Also of concern: internal investigations that found some marshals sleeping on the job, even testing positive for alcohol. And air marshal applicants given security clearances by the Transportation Security Administration were later found to have troubling — even criminal — backgrounds.

While they were never hired, former Transportation Inspector General Mary Schiavo says the nation needs more, better-qualified marshals.

"You have an agency that is trained to shoot from their seat and in some cases recruited from the ranks of prison guards. And they are not in the same environment as the highly financed, extremely educated technical terrorist," says Schiavo.

What should be done?

First, say marshals, drop all dress code, hotel and flight restrictions so they can blend in. Then, buff up the service's prestige so it can attract the best applicants — with the goal of making America safer and with the safety of the nation's skies on the line.