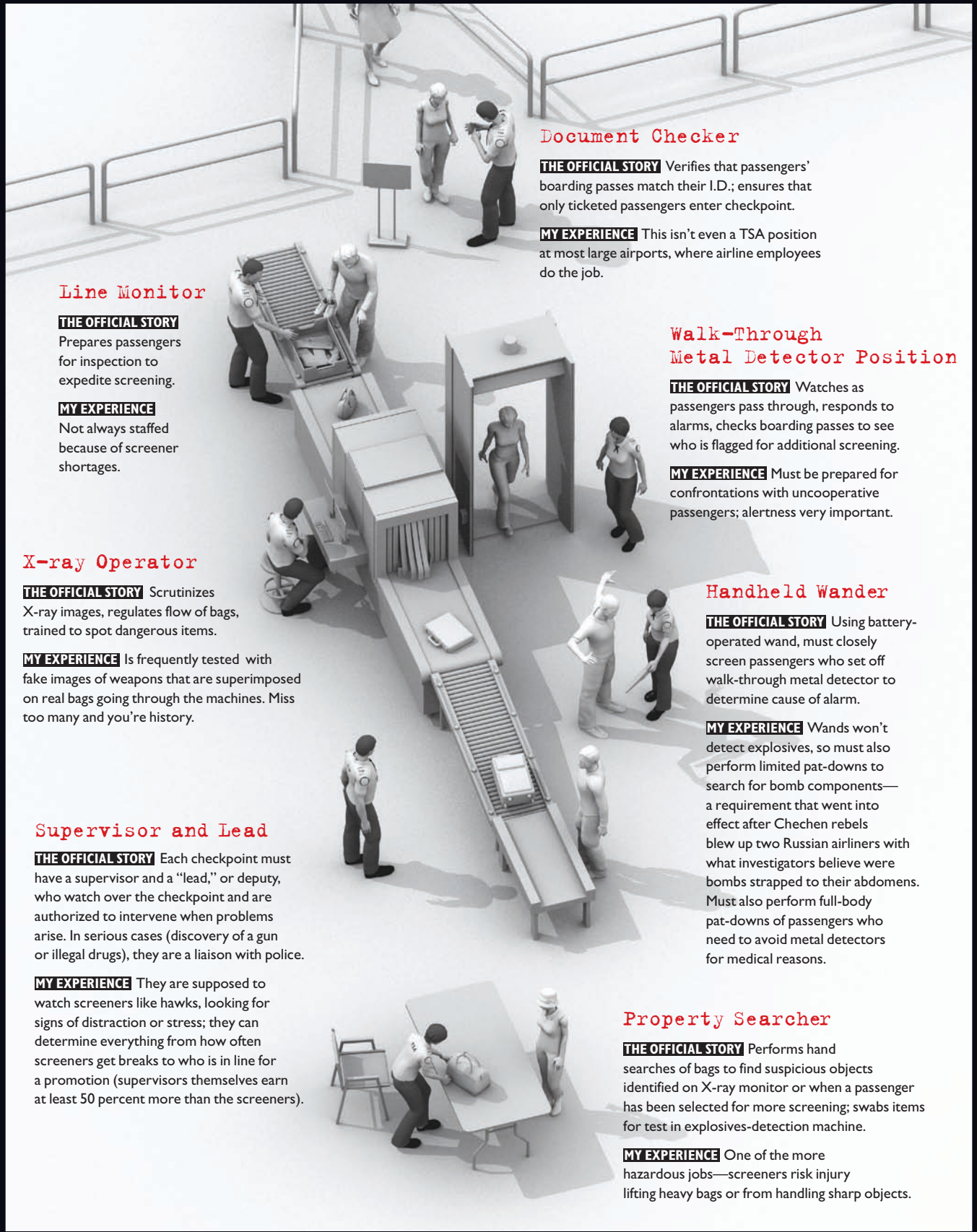


IN THE LINE OF DUTY

Two million passengers transit airport security checkpoints in the United States every day, but few understand how the checkpoints work. Here, our reporter's firsthand observations shed light on the official job description of a transportation security officer (TSO)



Line Monitor

THE OFFICIAL STORY

Prepares passengers for inspection to expedite screening.

MY EXPERIENCE

Not always staffed because of screener shortages.

X-ray Operator

THE OFFICIAL STORY

Scrutinizes X-ray images, regulates flow of bags, trained to spot dangerous items.

MY EXPERIENCE

Is frequently tested with fake images of weapons that are superimposed on real bags going through the machines. Miss too many and you're history.

Supervisor and Lead

THE OFFICIAL STORY

Each checkpoint must have a supervisor and a "lead," or deputy, who watch over the checkpoint and are authorized to intervene when problems arise. In serious cases (discovery of a gun or illegal drugs), they are a liaison with police.

MY EXPERIENCE

They are supposed to watch screeners like hawks, looking for signs of distraction or stress; they can determine everything from how often screeners get breaks to who is in line for a promotion (supervisors themselves earn at least 50 percent more than the screeners).

Document Checker

THE OFFICIAL STORY

Verifies that passengers' boarding passes match their I.D.; ensures that only ticketed passengers enter checkpoint.

MY EXPERIENCE

This isn't even a TSA position at most large airports, where airline employees do the job.

Walk-Through Metal Detector Position

THE OFFICIAL STORY

Watches as passengers pass through, responds to alarms, checks boarding passes to see who is flagged for additional screening.

MY EXPERIENCE

Must be prepared for confrontations with uncooperative passengers; alertness very important.

Handheld Wander

THE OFFICIAL STORY

Using battery-operated wand, must closely screen passengers who set off walk-through metal detector to determine cause of alarm.

MY EXPERIENCE

Wands won't detect explosives, so must also perform limited pat-downs to search for bomb components—a requirement that went into effect after Chechen rebels blew up two Russian airliners with what investigators believe were bombs strapped to their abdomens. Must also perform full-body pat-downs of passengers who need to avoid metal detectors for medical reasons.

Property Searcher

THE OFFICIAL STORY

Performs hand searches of bags to find suspicious objects identified on X-ray monitor or when a passenger has been selected for more screening; swabs items for test in explosives-detection machine.

MY EXPERIENCE

One of the more hazardous jobs—screeners risk injury lifting heavy bags or from handling sharp objects.