

Pittsburgh International is among the smaller airports where ICE was deployed. What may have led to the decision?

Regional staff size, call-out rates and paycheck uncertainty are creating needs, some say, even as TSA wait times at PIT remain relatively unscathed



LINDSAY SHACHNOW ✓

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

lshachnow@post-gazette.com ✕ 🐦

MAR 29, 2026

4:00 AM

Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents [started working at Pittsburgh International Airport](#) last week as part of a nationwide deployment at airports while [thousands of Transportation Security Administration employees continued to work without pay](#).

The agents were sent to “support airports facing the greatest strain” as more than 480 TSA officers have quit and thousands more have continued to call out, said DHS spokeswoman Lauren Bis.

Pittsburgh was among 14 airports where ICE agents were deployed, [CNN reported](#). Ms. Bis did not respond to questions about how the airports were chosen.

But while TSA lines snake through some of the nation's biggest airports, Pittsburgh International — one of the smaller airports on the list of airports ICE was sent to — has largely remained unscathed, leading many who work at and travel through the airport to wonder whether ICE's deployment was necessary.

Pittsburgh airport officials have said the partial government shutdown has [not had any significant effect on security checkpoint wait times](#).

"I see some inconsistencies," William McGee, senior fellow for aviation and travel at the Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit American Economic Liberties Project, said of the 14 airports. "I haven't seen Pittsburgh as being a chronic problem."

How federal agencies operate is not in the control of Allegheny County Airport Authority or any other airport, Pittsburgh airport spokesman Bob Kerlik said last week.

Many of the 14 are classified by the Federal Aviation Administration as Category X, reserved for the country's largest airports, said Keith Jeffries, vice president of K2 Security Screen Group and former federal security director at Los Angeles International Airport.

Pittsburgh International is a Category I airport, Mr. Jeffries said, meaning it is less busy and not an air travel hub.

But Mr. Jeffries said a smaller number of TSA agents calling off could have a bigger impact on an airport such as Pittsburgh International, which he estimated would have 250 full-time TSA workers when fully staffed.

At Los Angeles International, he said, there were 1,600 to 1,700 full-time TSA employees.

"The larger airports obviously have more staffing, and depending on the layout of a larger airport, they can move resources from one terminal to another based on their peak times," he said.

Long lines and call-outs

[Hourslong lines at some of the nation's airports](#) have put pressure on Congress to reach an agreement to fund the Department of Homeland Security. But [Democrats have pushed back](#), saying they would not approve funding for the department unless guardrails were put on the federal government's immigration enforcement tactics.

On Friday morning, [the Senate approved DHS funds](#) to pay some agencies — including TSA workers — but not ICE. The bill was met with resistance in the House later Friday, and House Speaker Mike Johnson rejected the bill, saying he plans to offer an alternative plan that would fund the entire department until May 22.

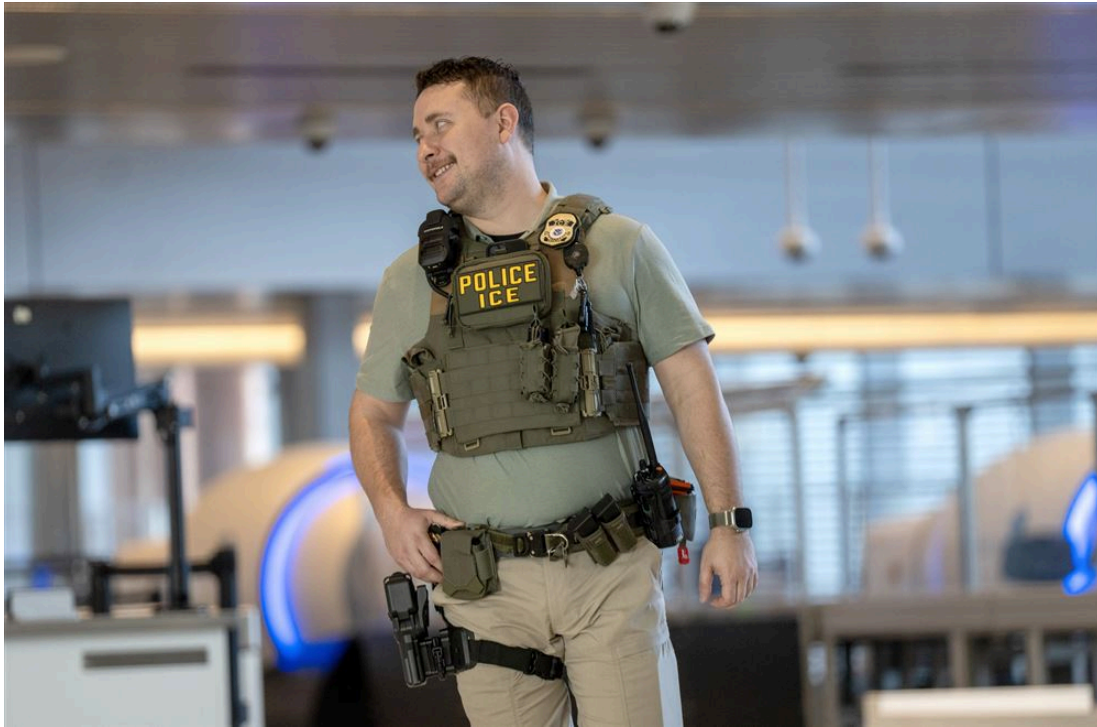
Finally on Friday, President Donald Trump [signed an executive order to pay TSA employees](#).

A DHS spokesperson told the Post-Gazette that TSA workers should get paid as early as Monday, though TSA agents in Pittsburgh say the payments might not immediately fix the problems airports are facing as call-out rates soar.

But the long lines reported at some of the nation's busiest airports are causing anxiety for people traveling through Pittsburgh International and other airports, even where lines aren't much of a problem.

John Glenn Columbus International Airport in Ohio even took to [social media on Thursday](#) to ask travelers to stop arriving so early.

Pittsburgh International told people to arrive [two hours before their flights](#) during the busy spring break travel season.



An agent from Immigration and Customs Enforcement stands at the security checkpoint at Pittsburgh International Airport on Tuesday, March 24, 2026.

(Steve Mellon/Post-Gazette)

Thursday's overall TSA call-out rate across the country reached 11.83%, the highest it has been during the partial shutdown, according to Department of Homeland Security data shared with the Post-Gazette. More than 3,450 workers called out, the department said.

Call-out rates at Pittsburgh International hovered around 20% last week, data shows. Some other airports have surpassed 40%, according to DHS, including Houston's George Bush Intercontinental Airport and Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson International.

To fill in the TSA staffing gaps, ICE agents arrived at Pittsburgh International Airport and were [trained on Monday](#). They [began public-facing work on Tuesday](#), local TSA agents said.

Late last week, a TSA officer at Pittsburgh International told the Post-Gazette that ICE agents were performing basic screening functions, including checking travel documents and helping travelers put their luggage in X-ray machines, allowing TSA officers to be used elsewhere.

"Those two roles are definitely the easiest and roles that require the least amount of training amongst everything that we do," said the TSA officer, who asked to remain anonymous. "The understanding is that they're going to be there until we get paid, and maybe even a little bit after that."

Throughout the week, the Post-Gazette saw ICE agents walking around the airport and standing near the security checkpoint.

“This administration PR stunt to have ICE helping at airports is nonsense. They are not permitted to do anything at our checkpoints,” said Kimberly Kraynak-Lambert, District 3 manager for the American Federation of Government Employees, the union that represents TSA officers. “The TSA officers are working and not getting paid while ICE is fully funded and getting a paycheck.”

Mr. Jeffries said the presence of ICE agents can preemptively prevent rowdiness and bad passenger behavior — even if their work doesn’t actually ease wait times.

“I know that ICE is extremely unpopular in some locations, but if you separate that, it's a calming effect to behave yourself,” he said.

“What if TSA agents were deployed to go help with immigration enforcement? They haven't been trained, either. It's basically, what would you like me to do?”

Still, Mr. McGee of the American Economic Liberties Project said bringing in the ICE agents has the potential to “make a bad situation worse.”

“By their very nature, [airports] are areas in which people of multiple ethnicities and nationalities travel,” he said. “It's not like other institutions ... if there's any sort of profiling going on, an airport is not the place where you want to do that.”

ICE’s airport presence was causing concern for some travelers, said Sheila Vélez Martínez, the Jack and Lovell Olender Professor of Asylum Refugee and Immigration Law at the University of Pittsburgh School of Law.

“The way that ICE agents have been conducting immigration enforcement across the United States has damaged the image and the trust that people have in them as an agency,” she said.

Jim Madalinsky, a spokesman for Allegheny County Police, said last week that police operations at the airport would not be affected by ICE’s presence.

Getting TSA officers paid

Even though TSA employees could start getting paychecks on Monday, the staffing issues might not be alleviated immediately.

TSA workers were still reeling from the [record 43-day government shutdown last fall](#). Workers say their bills have been piling up for weeks — some even calling off to work second jobs — so coming back to work might not be possible straight away.

“Everybody’s still up in the air because there’s no definite end to the problem,” said Bill Reese, a TSA agent at Pittsburgh International and former president of American Federation of Government Employees Local 332.

“Three shutdowns in six months is having a major effect on credit scores. ... There’s a lot of people out of money or running very, very low on money.”

During the last government shutdown, Mr. Reese said, some workers had to wait more than a week after it ended to get the money they were owed.

“We would have to try to figure out how to resolve all the financial debt and the financial obligations we took within the past two months,” the TSA officer at PIT who didn’t want to be identified told the Post-Gazette. “So that’s going to take a while to recover.”

As the financial pressure mounts while TSA officers wait to receive their paychecks, frustration was building as they were forced to work alongside paid ICE agents.

“Our officers are not happy with watching someone not working and getting paid . . . while they continue to struggle to feed their families,” Ms. Kraynak-Lambert said.

First Published: March 29, 2026, 4:00 a.m.

Updated: April 1, 2026, 11:04 a.m.



Lindsay Shachnow is a Post-Gazette reporter covering trending news and other topics in and around Pittsburgh. A New York City native, she is a graduate of Boston University's College of Communication.

✉ Ishachnow@post-gazette.com

✕ [@lpshachnow](https://twitter.com/lpshachnow)

🦋 [lpshachnow](https://www.linkedin.com/company/lpshachnow)

Popular in the Community



validity.com

Salesforce Data Integrity Tool
Salesforce Data Management
DemandTools

AdChoices 

Sponsored