

Amtrak looks at security along Northeast Corridor

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CHERRY HILL, N.J. — U.S. authorities continued to fine-tune security along the Northeast Corridor on Wednesday, though few regional riders expressed concern about the rails two days before the eighth anniversary of the 9/11 terrorists attacks.

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Amtrak conducted security exercises with counterterrorism and law enforcement agencies at about 150 passenger stations from Maine to Virginia on Wednesday.

The Transportation Security Administration said Operation ALERTS, or Allied Law Enforcement for Rail and Transit Security, was not in response to a specific threat.

Amtrak officials said no South Jersey stations or law enforcement personnel participated, though police departments in nearly 30 Pennsylvania municipalities were involved. In New Jersey, only the Newark and Elizabethtown police departments participated.

"The exercise today was performed on a random basis and it is quite possible that areas not included will be chosen at a later date," said Cliff Cole, a spokesman for Amtrak.

Law enforcement personnel from local, state and federal agencies descended on rails stations and increased patrols, heightened the security presence on trains, searched for explosives using dogs and conducted random bag inspections at unannounced locations.

In addition to the New Jersey locations, the operation was conducted from the morning commute to the evening commute in Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, Virginia, West Virginia and Washington, D.C.

Authorities said the effort would help them figure out how to better handle actual threats and acts of terrorism. Amtrak and TSA plan to conduct similar exercises in the future. About 750,000 passengers ride Amtrak and commuter rains along the Northeast Corridor every day.

No security personnel were seen on site during an afternoon visit to the New Jersey Transit station in Cherry Hill.

"I certainly can see how that could happen, but for some reason I just feel safe," said Steven Stepanavage, a retiree from Pennsauken, of the possibility of a bomb attack on the Philadelphia-bound train he was about to board. "I always try to think people are good and I know that's not always the case. . . . I guess I just want to believe that it's not going to happen."