



The Complexities of Creating a Best-in-Class Airport Operations Center from a **Security Perspective**

A Case Study of Louisville Muhammad Ali International Airport

1 | INTRODUCTION

In August 2021, Louisville Muhammad Ali International Airport (SDF) unveiled a new, state-of-the-art Airport Operations Center. The \$18.5 million space serves as the airport's nerve center and communications hub, allowing staff to monitor and respond to any operational event or situation around the clock.

Dan Mann is Executive Director of the Louisville Regional Airport Authority that manages SDF. Since joining the Authority in 2018, he has made it his mission to position SDF at the forefront of the industry; a new Operations Center was at the crux of that initiative. "The crucial role of the Operations Department was an immediate priority for me – making sure we assembled the best team and gave them the best tools, resources, and technology to do their job," he says.

Megan Atkins-Thoben, the Airport Authority's Director of Operations and Business Development, oversaw every phase of the project's execution. Through it all, Sentinel Consulting served as her trusted advisor, partner, and advocate.



"We told Sentinel how we wanted this to work, and they're the ones who have provided the guidance, security expertise, and quality control necessary to bring this extensive and challenging project to fruition."

-Megan Atkins-Thoben, Director of Operations and Business Development

2

BACKGROUND

FEW AIRPORTS IN THE WORLD handle more cargo than Louisville Mohammad Ali International Airport (SDF). Ranking fifth globally and third within the United States for cargo traffic, SDF is home to UPS World Port, the international sorting hub for United Parcel Service in North America. The airport also serves commercial travelers from across Kentucky and Southern Indiana. In 2019, the last year of "normal" travel before COVID, it accommodated a record-setting 4.2 million passengers.

While passenger traffic dropped in 2020, it was more than offset by an increase in cargo traffic. An unprecedented volume of online shopping orders, global shipments of PPE, and temperature-controlled Covid-19 vaccines headed to sites east of the Mississippi passed through the airport. Its operations team performed a daily, no-fail mission on which public health and international commerce depended.

Atkins-Thoben says, **"An operations center is important from a workforce and personnel perspective, but it's also the glue that holds the whole support team together."** Yet, despite SDF's quantity of cargo and critical role as a logistics hub, it lacked a comprehensive operations center. "We had a communication center and certified police dispatchers responsible for public safety, but the airport lacked much of the new technology that Airport Security should have at its disposal," she explains. It was also evident that much of the equipment needed upgrading, especially for the airport to be considered best-in-class, a goal of Mann's since his arrival. The challenge arose in keeping the current systems operational through the transition and improvements.

Executive Director Mann and Atkins-Thoben previously worked at an airport that made extensive use of mobile technology. "We wanted to move in that direction," says Atkins-Thoben. "In addition to a centralized Operations Center, we wanted information coming to us without us having to seek it out or being limited to sitting at a workstation. Our technology needs to be as smart and efficient as possible."

