



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Hearing Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)

Examining the President's FY 2020 Budget Request for the Transportation Security Administration and the U.S. Coast Guard

April 9, 2019

It is a pleasure to have two qualified, Senate-confirmed DHS leaders here—a rarity in the Department given recent events. I hope that whoever the President nominates to be the next Secretary will be more qualified than the last Secretary—and more capable of standing up for American values and the rule of law.

Both TSA and the Coast Guard execute missions critical to homeland security. Unfortunately, the President's proposal would undercut these critical missions in order to fund a border wall. The President's plans place the homeland at risk.

To start with the TSA, the threat environment facing the nation's transportations systems is active and constantly evolving. And yet, the Administration's budget request fails to address major staffing and morale challenges facing TSA's frontline security workforce. TSA has consistently struggled with low morale and high attrition across its workforce, and these struggles threaten TSA's ability to execute its mission.

Earlier this year, we saw the debilitating impact the government shutdown had on the TSA workforce, as many Transportation Security Officers, or TSOs, struggled to provide for their families and pay their bills. The strain on unpaid TSOs during the government shutdown magnified financial pressures already facing the TSO workforce, which is underpaid compared to other Federal workers. Entry-level TSOs are paid as low as about \$32,600 per year, which amounts to \$15.68 per hour—little more than some less demanding jobs elsewhere in the airport. Unlike employees at most Federal agencies, TSOs do not receive regularly scheduled salary increases and lack basic workplace protections and rights. Administrator Pekoske has acknowledged that better pay and increased staffing would result in lower attrition and better mission execution, and he has the authority to grant pay increases, if funded. However, the FY 2020 budget request for TSA fails to include funding for salary increases.

To make matters worse, the President's FY 2020 budget actually cuts TSA staffing by 815 full-time equivalent positions compared to currently enacted levels. A proposal making such cuts in the face of pressing threats against our transportation systems and steady increases in passenger volume is a dire indictment of President Trump's understanding of how to keep our country secure. Moreover, the President proposes cutting or eliminating several critical security programs. He proposes cutting 50 canine teams, which are critical to ensuring effective and efficient passenger screening. He also proposes eliminating the VIPR Program, which is TSA's most visible and mobile resource for surface transportation security, and eliminating TSA's exit lane staffing. Additionally, he would cut the Law Enforcement Officer Reimbursement program, which supports placing uniformed officers near screening checkpoints in over 300 airports nationwide.

The Trump Administration should be focused on bolstering Federal support for such programs, not eliminating them. In addition, the budget fails to propose making significant investments to improve air cargo security, including funding a pilot to test new cargo screening technologies, as required under the TSA Modernization Act which Congress enacted last fall. The President proposed many of these cuts in each of his previous budget proposals, and Congress has repeatedly rejected them. In fact, Members of this Committee worked to include in the TSA Modernization Act language to protect many of these programs. The Administration apparently did not bother to read the statute when compiling its budget request. If enacted, I fear this proposal could lead to chaos and significant vulnerabilities within our nation's transportation systems.

Equally important to the discussion of our nation's homeland security are efforts to secure our maritime interests. The U.S. Coast Guard carries out critical homeland security missions including maritime law enforcement, drug and migrant interdictions, port security, and the protection of U.S. security and sovereignty throughout the world. With such a vast

footprint and mission, the U.S. Coast Guard workforce is under constant pressure. And yet, like the TSA workforce, the Coast Guard workforce constantly delivers for the American people. During the recent government shutdown, Coast Guard Members went to work with no pay—with some struggling to provide for their families. That military service members would have to work without pay is unconscionable. Instead of fully supporting their efforts, the Administration proposes underfunding the Coast Guard at a time when natural disasters, cyberattacks, and drug trafficking are making its efforts more difficult every day. Last fiscal year, Congress made significant investments in modernizing Coast Guard assets, including funds to make the Coast Guard's acquisition of a new Polar Security Cutter possible. These investments, however, do not fully compensate for years of deferred maintenance and recapitalization of the Coast Guard's fleet and shore infrastructure. Without increased investments to upgrade these assets, the Coast Guard will risk significant capability gaps.

To face these challenges, the Coast Guard must also develop effective retention and recruitment tools to maintain a capable workforce. The service needs become more inclusive, diverse, and equitable to ensure it reflects the public it serves. I look forward to hearing from the Commandant about how he plans to improve the Coast Guard's retention and recruitment policies.

Finally, I must convey my frustration and disappointment that the Coast Guard and the Department of Homeland Security have stonewalled the efforts of this Committee, along with the Committee on Oversight and Reform, to conduct oversight of the Coast Guard Academy. Last year, the DHS Inspector General substantiated claims that the Coast Guard retaliated against a black, lesbian officer after she reported she was subjected to harassment and a hostile work environment, due in part to her race, gender, and sexual orientation. Following multiple incomplete and heavily-redacted responses from the Coast Guard to our request for documents on these matters, Chairman Cummings and I—along with Chairman Correa and others—wrote to Secretary Nielsen demanding a full production of documents be provided by today. If we do not receive a response by the close of business, we will be forced to pursue other means to compel production.

As Chairman of this Committee, I will not stand for misconduct within the Department, nor will I stand for anything less than full transparency when this Committee attempts to carry out its oversight responsibilities.

#

Media contact: Adam Comis at (202) 225-9978