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

The TSA Workforce Crisis: A Homeland Security Risk

May 21, 2019

TSA is essential to the nation's homeland security enterprise. It could not do its critical work without its strongest asset: its workforce. Transportation Security Officers, or TSOs, screen millions of passengers every day at airport checkpoints, while Federal Air Marshals, TSA Inspectors, and other TSA employees work behind the scenes to secure our aviation system. Unfortunately, TSA's workforce is not receiving the resources and support it needs to execute its mission successfully.

The Trump Administration's budget requests for the past three years have been woefully inadequate in supporting the TSA workforce—to the point that the Administration now is undermining TSA's ability to carry out its mission. Shockingly, this year's budget request proposed cutting the TSA workforce by 815 full-time employees from enacted levels, when staffing is already stretched thin. The Administration has also failed to request the funding necessary to provide sorely needed salary increases for TSOs, some of whom have worked for years on end with few, if any, raises.

Today, we will hear from one of our witnesses about a report that found, under current practices, it would take an entry-level TSO 30 years to reach the top of the entry-level pay band. As a result of low salaries and insufficient raises, many TSOs live paycheck to paycheck. Earlier this year, we saw the debilitating impact the government shutdown had on TSOs, as many officers experienced financial hardship due to missed paychecks that prevented them from providing for their families. The strain during the shutdown magnified pressures already facing TSOs, who are underpaid compared to most other Federal workers and vulnerable to low morale and high attrition. Unlike employees at most Federal agencies, TSOs do not receive regularly scheduled salary increases and lack basic workplace protections and rights. In 2018, according to employee surveys, TSA ranked dead last out of 410 Federal agency subcomponents on employee pay satisfaction. TSA Administrator Pekoske has acknowledged that better pay and increased staffing would result in lower attrition and better mission execution.

Even though the Administrator is authorized to grant salary increases if funded, the agency has not fully addressed long-term concerns about the competitiveness of a TSO salary. Low pay, in combination with TSA's chronically low morale and limited benefits and workforce protections, have resulted in high attrition rates for TSOs. A recent DHS Office of Inspector General report confirmed that TSA could save millions of taxpayer dollars if TSA improved its hiring and retention practices for TSOs. TSA spends millions annually to hire thousands of TSOs, only to replace them with new TSOs soon after. Not only are its workforce challenges resulting in the loss of productivity, diminished expertise, and decreased employee morale—but TSA is wasting millions of taxpayer dollars and possibly putting our security at risk. This is unacceptable. I have introduced a bill, the Rights for Transportation Security Officers Act of 2019, to provide TSA frontline workers with the same rights and protections afforded to other Federal workers under Title 5 of the U.S. Code. This bill would set a path for increased pay and benefits for TSOs, providing access to the same basic personnel system used by most of the Federal government. While we work towards building consensus in Congress, the Administration must stop moving in the wrong direction.

Concerningly, Administrator Pekoske has not confirmed that he would allow for collective bargaining at TSA beyond December 2019. Collective bargaining is one of the few workforce protection and grievance mechanisms TSOs have under the current TSA personnel structure. The potential loss of such a right would only further drive down morale and hurt TSO staffing levels, even as passenger volume continues to increase nationwide. When TSA is short staffed and not functioning effectively, airports can become crowded, crippled, and vulnerable to attacks. These are risks that we simply cannot afford to take. That is why we have to explore solutions to address TSA's attrition problems and improve workforce protections for TSOs head-on. Addressing TSA's workforce challenges in a strategic manner will not only improve frontline workforce morale, but also advance aviation security in the face of evolving threats.

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