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Hearing Statement of Transportation and Maritime Security Subcommittee Chairman Lou Correa (D-CA)

The TSA Workforce Crisis: A Homeland Security Risk

May 21, 2019

Today's hearing will discuss the challenges facing the TSA workforce and how they impact TSA's national security mission. We are all well aware of the threats facing our nation's transportation systems. Terrorists, lone wolves, and other threat actors continue to target crowded airports, mass transit hubs, and air carriers, with the ultimate goal of taking down a plane.

TSA has a no-fail mission. A single bomb or weapon slipping through security could be used to devastating effect. Transportation Security Officers, or TSOs, work on the frontline as our country's main defenders against these threats. Their jobs are extremely difficult, as they must look for a needle in the haystack of overstuffed bags, pat down passengers in uncomfortable areas, detect fraudulent IDs, and keep pace with evolving policies and technologies—all while serving as the face of government towards impatient and sometimes unruly passengers. We must ensure that TSA hires, trains, and retains a professional workforce should be one of the Department of Homeland Security's top priorities.

Unfortunately, this Administration has placed supporting the TSA workforce on the backburner. President Trump has prioritized a border wall above all other homeland security missions, threatening to undermine the security of the traveling public. Most recently, we learned last week that the Administration is sending TSA employees, including TSOs, to the southwest border, just as the busy summer travel season is about to begin. TSA's workforce is already stretched too thin and cannot afford such diversions.

TSA's morale is low, and its attrition is high. Last year, out of 410 Federal agency subcomponents surveyed, TSA came in 410th place when it came to employee pay satisfaction—that is, last place. TSOs are among the lowest-paid workers in government, and we saw during the recent shutdown that many of them live paycheck to paycheck. TSOs also lack basic workforce rights and protections, such as full collective bargaining rights and the ability to appeal disciplinary actions to an independent third party. This is no way to run a national security agency.

TSA Administrator David Pekoske has attempted to address some of these challenges by creating a career progression plan for TSOs, but more must be done. Unfortunately, in response to my questions at our Subcommittee's budget hearing last month, Administrator Pekoske refused to commit to continue working with the TSA union once the current collective bargaining agreement expires this December. Collective bargaining at TSA is already limited in scope and inadequate to meet the needs of the workforce; refusing to advance even the status quo would amount to a counterproductive attack on labor. I hope Administrator Pekoske will decide to continue allowing a unionized workforce.

The Administration must recognize the need to address TSA's workforce challenges, as TSA's attrition rate threatens to outpace its hiring rate. In 2016 and 2017, TSA hired more than 19,300 TSOs, yet lost more than 15,500 TSOs. If those numbers move just slightly in the wrong direction, we could see a dwindling TSO workforce—even as passenger volume continues to increase dramatically. Already, lines in front of TSA checkpoints snake through airport terminals, hindering airport operations and creating security vulnerabilities.

Airport security must be a priority. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses about the scope of the problems facing TSA and recommendations to address them.

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