



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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

Securing America's Transportation and Maritime Systems: A Review of the Fiscal Year 2021 Budget Requests for the Transportation Security Administration and the U.S. Coast Guard

March 11, 2020

TSA and the Coast Guard both execute missions critical to homeland security. Unfortunately, the President's budget proposal undercuts the mission of these critical agencies. The budget does not adequately fund nor address major morale and retention problems within TSA's frontline workforce.

Last year, the DHS Inspector General released a report which found that TSA faced major challenges in retaining Transportation Security Officers (TSOs) and that, over a two-year span in 2016 and 2017, one in three TSOs quit. I applaud TSA's initiatives in this year's budget to increase the pay for high-skilled TSO's and provide annual pay increases for service longevity—but they do not go far enough.

This budget does nothing to address TSOs' lack of basic workplace protections that have been granted to workers in other Federal agencies. Last week, the House passed my bill, H.R. 1140, the "Rights for Transportation Security Officers Act of 2020," which guarantees basic rights for all TSA employees by moving them to Title 5.

TSA's budget dramatically reduces its plans to procure new Computed Topography machines, which greatly enhance the screening of carry-on bags.

TSA's Capital Investment Plan calls for procurement of approximately 400 CT machines per year through FY 2024—yet astoundingly, this year's budget only proposes funding for 30 units.

Since the Administrator has previously highlighted this technology as one of the most critical tools to countering current threats to aviation, I find the omission of adequate funding in the budget alarming.

The President's budget request also proposes a staffing cut of 1,110 full-time equivalent employees, the elimination of exit lane staffing and the VIPR Program—TSA's main operational resource for surface transportation security—and elimination of the Law Enforcement Officer Reimbursement Program, which supports placing uniformed officers near screening checkpoints in over 300 airports nationwide.

Many of these cuts have been present in each of the President's previous budget proposals, and Congress has repeatedly rejected them. 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's waters.

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. Over the last two fiscal years, Congress has made significant investments in modernizing Coast Guard assets, including funds to make the Coast Guard’s acquisition of a new Polar Security Cutter possible.

This year’s budget seeks funding for a second new Polar Security Cutter as well as National Security Cutters which the Coast Guard needs to keep our nation’s coastlines safe. These investments, however, do not fully compensate for years of deferred maintenance and recapitalization of the Coast Guard’s fleet and shore infrastructure.

A February 2019 report by the Government Accountability Office found that about 45 percent of the Coast Guard’s shore infrastructure is beyond its service life, and current backlogs of maintenance and recapitalization projects will cost at least \$2.6 billion to address. The FY 2021 budget request provides only \$75 million for shore infrastructure projects, which would not begin to address the backlog. This is unacceptable.

Given the pace of climate change and continually rising sea levels, failure to begin addressing the backlog of shore infrastructure projects could prove catastrophic and extremely costly over the coming years. In addition to its shore infrastructure backlog, the Coast Guard faces challenges in upgrading and maintaining its IT infrastructure.

The FY 2021 budget provides approximately \$24 million to enhance the Coast Guard’s IT infrastructure, which represents only a small fraction of the annual IT backlog the Coast Guard faces and does little to ensure Coast Guard personnel are connected. Coast Guard personnel must have reliable access to modern, secure IT systems to do to their jobs and protect the American people.

Finally, I want to turn to personnel matters and workforce retention issues within the Coast Guard. The Coast Guard has struggled to recruit and retain woman and minorities. This Committee has expressed concerns about the about the lack of racial, gender, and regional diversity within the Coast Guard and the Coast Guard Academy, and about the Coast Guard’s efforts to address bullying, harassment, and whistleblower retaliation.

This Committee and the Committee on Oversight and Reform investigated these issues for more than 18 months and found major deficiencies in the Coast Guard’s policies for investigating allegations of harassment and bullying. In a staff report released in December regarding the investigation, the Committees outlined seven recommendations, which, if implemented will greatly strengthen the Coast Guard’s ability to respond to these incidents.

Throughout the investigation, I was disappointed by the Coast Guard’s responsiveness to requests for information and by the Commandant’s decision not testify in person at our hearing about these issues in December. I am heartened, however, by a recent letter from the Commandant admitting that our investigation identified deficiencies within the service and expressing an intent to our staff report’s recommendations.

The service needs become more inclusive, diverse, and equitable to ensure it reflects the public it serves and protects its personnel.

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