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Subcommittee Hearing Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)

The Role of Technology in Aviation Security

October 19, 2023

We meet today under a cloud of chaos and dysfunction, as the Republican majority has failed to elect a Speaker for more than two weeks and counting. Each day that passes without a Speaker brings us one day closer to the deadline to fund the government, which is now less than a month away.

A government shutdown would be detrimental to the TSA workforce, along with other workforces across the government, and it would place our transportation systems at risk. I hope my Republican colleagues will figure out a way to bring the House back to regular order as quickly as possible.

Now, turning to the topic of today's hearing. Throughout the past two decades, TSA has worked to field technologies capable of detecting threats to aviation and processing a large and diverse population of travelers and their baggage. TSA has succeeded in developing some impressive technologies—and has also made its fair share of missteps.

Many of us remember the expensive yet ineffective "puffer" machines TSA purchased, as well as the whole-body imaging machines that could not be outfitted with appropriate privacy filters.
In both cases, TSA ultimately had to pull machines from the field, at great expense to the taxpayer. Too often, TSA has relied on a handful of large technology manufacturers to provide screening equipment, resulting in limited competition. In recent years, at my urging, TSA has worked to create additional opportunities for small and minority-owned businesses to compete for technology contracts.

These businesses provide innovative approaches and help spur improvements to TSA's capabilities, but they sometimes need support to be able to withstand the long timelines TSA requires for testing and evaluating new technologies. TSA must continue to foster increased competition and innovation within the screening technology marketplace by expanding opportunities for small and minority-owned businesses.

TSA must also continue to improve its technologies to ensure they do not impact certain passenger populations in a discriminatory manner. We have long seen some groups of passengers alarm TSA's screening technologies at much higher rates than others. Transgender passengers have been forced to undergo invasive pat-downs because their bodies do not conform to an arbitrary standard. Black women have been subjected to pat-downs of their hair because many of their hairstyles do not conform to TSA's standard.

Passengers wearing religious headwear or using assistive devices have caused alarm after alarm because, again, they do not conform to a standard. TSA must do a better job of considering the needs of *all* passengers when developing the requirements for technologies. Thankfully, under this Administration, TSA is moving in the right direction.

In June, TSA finished deploying a new software algorithm to Advanced Imaging Technology machines across the country. The algorithm allows for gender-neutral screening and reduces false alarms for all passengers by 50%. TSA must build on this success to further reduce invasive pat-downs, and the agency must refine its processes to ensure new technologies are thoroughly vetted to prevent discrimination.

TSA must also continue its efforts to procure and deploy Computed Tomography machines, which provide important improvements to TSA's screening of carry-on luggage. Deploying these machines to all screening lanes across the country will require sustained and dedicated funding. My bill, the *Fund the TSA Act*, would establish a fund dedicated to checkpoint security technologies paid for by a modest increase to passenger security fees.

I look forward to continuing to work with TSA, GAO, and stakeholders to ensure TSA's security technologies meet the needs of the traveling public.

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