COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson

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

Identity Management Innovation: Looking Beyond REAL ID

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The title of this hearing references "Looking Beyond REAL ID"—but in my opinion, we should not be focusing on the future of identity management until we address the glaring vulnerabilities present at security checkpoints today.

Last December, TSA informed the Committee of security incidents that have occurred within the Registered Traveler program. As carried out by the private sector, the Registered Traveler program has allowed some passengers to enter security checkpoints using fraudulent identities. In at least one known instance, the Registered Traveler program allowed a passenger to enroll in its program using a fake ID.

In another case, a passenger found a boarding pass in an airport trashcan, and a private sector employee escorted the passenger into the security checkpoint without verifying their identity. Enough is enough. TSA must act to close these critical security gaps and regain control of identity verification. Vetting and verifying passenger identities is a core layer of TSA's approach to security. It should be carried out by Federal employees who are trained to a rigorous standard—not outsourced to a private company seeking to profit off the inconvenience of security screening.

For the past year, I have called on TSA to require all passengers to go through TSA's identity verification processes. But instead of acting to address existing vulnerabilities that place travelers at risk every day, TSA has focused on developing next generation technologies like digital IDs and facial recognition.These technologies are trendy, and they may offer some security and convenience benefits, but they also pose significant risks to privacy, civil rights, and civil liberties. Racial biases of some facial recognition algorithms have been well documented.

Though TSA has put its technologies through testing to prevent against bias, mass deployment of facial recognition threatens to normalize technology that could be easily abused in sectors not subject to such testing standards. Similarly, because of the breadth of TSA's operations, which screen millions of passengers each day, the agency's adoption of digital ID standards may drive the future of the identity industry. TSA must act responsibly to prioritize privacy protections above small improvements to passenger convenience.

I also remain concerned that TSA is ill-prepared to enforce requirements for passengers to present REAL ID-compliant identification at TSA checkpoints. Though the current deadline for enforcement is not until May 2025, TSA must act now to push for increased REAL ID adoption rates to avoid major disruptions at checkpoints.

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