COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

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

Twenty Years of Workforce Challenges: The Need for H.R. 903, the Rights for the TSA Workforce Act of 2021

May 4, 2021

TSA is essential to the nation's homeland security enterprise. It could not do its critical work without its strongest asset: its workforce. For nearly two decades, Transportation Security Officers, or TSOs, have screened millions of passengers every day at airport checkpoints. Unfortunately, after almost 20 years of promises by previous administrations to improve TSA's personnel management system, the TSA workforce still lacks the resources and support it needs to execute its mission successfully.

Despite serving on the frontlines of homeland security during the COVID-19 pandemic, TSOs remain among the lowest-paid Federal workers, and they do not receive regular salary raises afforded to most Federal employees. Under TSA's mismanaged personnel system, employees lack basic civil service protections and benefits Congress codified for most Federal workers many decades ago. In recent years, TSOs have worked steadily through government shutdowns, staff shortages, increased passenger volumes and job responsibilities, and now a pandemic—yet their pay has remained stagnant. According to employee surveys, TSA ranks dead last out of 415 Federal agency subcomponents on employee pay satisfaction.

TSA has used its administrative authority to limit the scope of issues subject to collective bargaining, and TSOs lack the ability to appeal adverse personnel actions to an objective third party like other Federal workers. As a result of these inequitable conditions, the TSA workforce has extremely low morale and high attrition. TSA spends millions annually to hire thousands of TSOs, only to replace them with new TSOs soon after. These issues not only cost taxpayers millions spent on constant recruitment and training, but ultimately they undermine TSA's security mission.

The Trump Administration attempted to undermine the TSA workforce through inadequate funding for the agency and threats to end collective bargaining for the 45,000 frontline officers protecting our nation's transportation system. I am pleased to see the Biden Administration take encouraging steps to address these concerns. However, more needs to be done to provide full protections to these frontline workers.

Over the last 15 years, with the support of the American Federation of Government Employees and several colleagues, I have introduced and supported numerous measures that would provide TSA employees with a more equitable personnel management system. With each Congress that passes, our legislative efforts garner increasing support. Last Congress, I introduced H.R. 1140, the Rights for Transportation Security Officers Act of 2020. The House twice passed the measure with 242 bipartisan cosponsors. This Congress, several colleagues and I introduced H.R. 903, the Rights for the TSA Workforce Act of 2021—and I am hopeful this will be the Congress we get this effort across the finish

line. 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.

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. TSOs continue to serve on our frontlines, protecting the traveling public during the national pandemic. To date, over 7,800 TSA employees have tested positive for COVID-19 and tragically at least 16 have died after contracting the virus. It is high time we do right by them and provide them the same rights afforded to most Federal workers under Title 5.

I strongly urge my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to support my bill, and I look forward to partnering with the Biden Administration to find ways to support the TSA workforce administratively while Congress works toward a statutory solution.

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