

**Statement of Balram Bheodari, General Manager
Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport**

**Congressional Hearing:
“Concealed Carry-Ons: Confronting the Surge in
Firearms at TSA Checkpoints”**

**Before the
House Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Transportation and Maritime Security
February 15, 2022 * 2 p.m. EST**

Chairwoman Coleman, Ranking Member Gimenez, members of the Subcommittee, Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Katko and members of the full Committee, thank you for inviting me to speak today about this especially important issue. We appreciate the Committee’s support of Atlanta’s Airport and your commitment to airport safety.

I am Balram Bheodari, General Manager at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport (ATL). On behalf of Atlanta Mayor Andre Dickens, I am honored to appear before this Subcommittee to provide ATL’s perspective on reducing the number of firearms at our screening checkpoints.

The team at ATL knows firsthand just how serious this issue is.

On Saturday, November 20, 2021 at 1:22 p.m., a passenger presented his carry-on bag for inspection at the Main Domestic Security Checkpoint. His bag was selected for secondary screening, and during that process, he reached into the bag and grabbed his weapon. The weapon discharged – once -- and passengers in the security queue understandably ran for cover. Social media posts of the incident began almost instantaneously, some of them describing multiple gunshots and an active shooter at the Airport.

That was not the case.

Our law enforcement team responded immediately, and very quickly secured the scene. Our response to this incident and our ability to return operations to normal in a timely manner speaks volumes about ATL's preparedness. However, it also reinforces the challenges posed by the increased presence of weapons at security screening locations.

In 2019, more than 824 million passengers were screened nationwide, and 4,400 weapons were found at TSA checkpoints that year.

However, in 2021, TSA officers screened 585 million passengers and discovered 5,972 firearms at checkpoints. Some 86% of those guns were loaded.

Clearly, this is an issue that needs to be addressed nationwide.

The question must be asked – why are so many guns retrieved at our checkpoints?

The first answer reflects a bit of good news. It highlights the exceptional work of our dedicated TSA officers. It is their job to ensure the safety of the flying public, and – through their diligence and advances in screening technology – they are doing precisely that.

We contend that the increase in firearm confiscation is a function of an individual gun owner's lack of responsibility. Be it forgetfulness or a misguided belief that weapons will not be discovered. We must continue to inform and educate the public about applicable firearm rules and regulations.

In collaboration, we at ATL have taken substantial steps to bring attention to this issue.

- We have partnered with airlines and with security and law enforcement agencies at the local, state and federal levels to expand messaging and increase public awareness.
- We have expanded our own messaging in three different channels:

- First, staff have been trained on the growing issue of guns at checkpoints. Their scripted message to passengers in queue has been modified to include this reminder: “Please check your bag for any firearms.”
- Next, we have incorporated dynamic and static signage with increased message frequency.
- And finally, we have shared gun restriction messaging with rideshare operators and local media outlets, reminding passengers that guns are not allowed at airport checkpoints.

What more can be done?

There are four elements we recommend for further exploration:

- First, strengthen the penalties for violators by reviewing the existing fine structure.
- Next, have violators attend mandatory gun safety training.
- Third, consider the option of including violators on the “No Fly” list until training is complete.
- And finally, assess the possible suspension of trusted travel privileges for violators.

In partnership, we are consistently examining ways to inform and educate, and focus intently on reducing firearms brought to ATL’s screening checkpoints. We appreciate the Subcommittee’s attention to this issue and your commitment to improving the safety of our nation’s airports.

Thank you for your time.