

Rep. Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS), Chairman of the Committee on Homeland Security
Floor Statement in Support of H.R. 1140
March 4, 2020

For well over a decade, Chairwoman Nita Lowey and I have championed this legislation to provide TSA frontline security workers the basic rights and benefits they deserve.

Today, H.R. 1140 has 242 bipartisan cosponsors and is strongly supported by the American Federation of Government Employees and the Transport Workers Union of America.

When TSA was stood up after the September 11 attacks, Congress gave the agency broad authority to develop a new, more nimble, personnel system to address national security issues that threatened our transportation system.

Over the years, TSA's security policies, technologies, and capabilities have evolved to provide a formidable defense against potential terrorist attacks.

Unfortunately, TSA's personnel management system has not evolved with the rest of the agency. The modern, nimble system Congress envisioned was never realized.

Instead, Transportation Security Officers, or TSOs, are subject to an antiquated system that does not provide appropriate pay, regular salary increases, or basic civil service protections.

Further, an employee subject to a disciplinary action does not have the right to appeal to an independent third party such as the Merit Systems Protection Board.

Today, the TSA Administrator serves as the judge, jury, and executioner for disciplinary proceedings.

According to a former TSA Deputy Administrator, the lack of due process protections within TSA has bred a culture of retribution and arbitrary personnel practices, leading to misbehavior and a reluctance to report security vulnerabilities.

When TSA leadership has used its special personnel authorities, it has been mostly to benefit senior management, not the frontline workforce.

In one instance, a senior manager received \$90,000 in bonuses in a single year.

Yet, the men and women in the screening workforce make starting salaries of just \$29,000 and are among the lowest paid Federal employees.

They are forced to live paycheck to paycheck even as their job responsibilities have grown increasingly complex with changes in threats and technologies.

Today, few TSOs have advanced beyond the bottom levels of TSA's pay bands, even after years of service.

Under the Obama Administration, the frontline TSA workforce was, for the first time, granted the ability to unionize.

Many of us hoped that this change would lead to TSA abandoning unfair policies.

Disappointingly, TSA limited the range of issues subject to collective bargaining to a narrow set of issues that, over time, have been repeatedly scaled back.

TSA struggles with low morale and high attrition, consistently ranking near the bottom of the annual “Best Places to Work” survey.

In fact, this year TSA ranked 415th out of 415 agency subcomponents—dead last—on pay satisfaction.

Low morale and high attrition have had an adverse impact on the agency, crippling TSA’s ability to develop a mature workforce.

According to the DHS Inspector General, over a two-year span in 2016 and 2017, one in three Transportation Security Officers quit.

As Members of Congress, many of us fly two or three times a week.

We probably see and interact with Transportation Security Officers more than any other Federal employees. We know them.

How can we ask these brave men and women to protect us from terrorist attacks, yet not provide them with the basic protections most Federal employees receive?

This bill will place TSA under Title 5 like most other Federal agencies, granting the workforce better pay and regular salary increases.

Employees would have robust collective bargaining rights like other Federal employees, such as Customs and Border Protection Officers in the Department of Homeland Security.

And in instances when an employee feels they have been unfairly disciplined, they could have their case considered by an independent party like other Federal employees.

Importantly, TSA management would still be able to remove screeners from duty if their presence jeopardizes the mission of the agency, and security procedures would not be subject to collective bargaining.

And while investing in the workforce will have an up-front cost, it will pay off in the long run.

The DHS Inspector General found that in 2017 alone, TSA spent approximately \$16 million to hire and train nearly 2,000 people who left within months of being hired.

That level of turnover is not sustainable.

Enactment of H.R. 1140 will reduce attrition and improve morale and position TSA to have a more experienced workforce with the proficiency needed to execute TSA’s national security mission.