

**TESTIMONY OF**  
**Ralph Cutié**  
**Director and Chief Executive Officer**  
**Miami International Airport**

**BEFORE**

**House Committee on Homeland Security Subcommittee on Transportation and Maritime Security**

**ON**

**Concealed Carry-Ons: Confronting the Surge in Firearms at TSA Checkpoints**  
**February 15, 2022**

Good afternoon Chairwoman Watson Coleman, Ranking Member Gimenez, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for inviting me to testify before you today along with this distinguished panel of aviation and law enforcement partners on this very important and alarming issue.

My name is Ralph Cutié, and I am the Director and Chief Executive Officer for the Miami-Dade County Aviation System which includes Miami International Airport (MIA), Miami-Opa Locka General Aviation Airport (OPF), Miami Executive General Aviation Airport (TMB), Homestead General Aviation Airport (X51), and the Training and Transition Airport (TNT).

**Background**

For our discussion today, I will focus primarily on MIA but there is also some national context that I believe is important. MIA is operated by the Miami-Dade Aviation Department and is the property of Miami-Dade County government. MIA offers more flights to Latin America and the Caribbean than any other U.S. airport, is America's second-busiest airport for international passengers, boasts a lineup of over 90 air carriers and is the top U.S. airport for international freight. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, MIA handled over 47 million passengers. MIA is also the leading economic engine for Miami-Dade County and the state of Florida, generating business revenue of \$31.9 billion annually and approximately 60 percent of all international visitors to Florida. MIA's vision is to grow from a recognized hemispheric hub to a global airport of choice that offers customers a world-class experience and an expanded route network with direct passenger and cargo access to all world regions.

Covid-19 put an immediate halt to our vision. From a record setting 47 million passengers in 2019, MIA experienced empty terminals and empty aircrafts. If not for the financial assistance provided by Congress, MIA along with every other airport in this country would not be in the position to restart our industry.

But with this restart, new and unexpected issues have arisen. Specifically, an increase of firearm confiscations at our passenger checkpoints.

Madam Chair, I applaud you and this Committee for clearly recognizing the problem and putting together today's hearing in the effort to finding solutions to this problem which is critical to the continued safe and efficient operation of the nation's aviation system.

According to the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF), civilian firearm purchases in the United States in 2000 totaled about 7 million. By 2010 that number was approaching 10 million. In 2020, the first

year of the pandemic, over 22 million guns were sold in this country and estimates range as high as 40% for the number of those sales that were to first-time gun buyers.

Now, I know that those facts raise a lot of questions that we are not here today to answer but I cite them because they give context to the discussion that we are having. These numbers tell us that there are significantly more guns in circulation today and a lot of people out there that are not experienced in owning a gun and the solemn responsibilities that go with it. Add to that the forgetful, careless and clueless and you can see the results quite clearly.

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) officers across the State of Florida have seen a surge in passengers bringing guns to airport checkpoints, breaking records at airports across the country.

According to TSA published data, TSA officers detected a record number of firearms at airport security checkpoints in 2021, establishing a new 20-year record—even with fewer passengers traveling due to the pandemic. By December 31, 2021, TSA officers stopped 5,972 firearms at our nation's airport checkpoints. The number of firearms that TSA officers are stopping at airport checkpoints is alarming and Florida airports are certainly not immune. And we suffer the consequences. While the vast majority of passengers caught with firearms have no ill intent, the negative impact on the airport is undeniable. Screening is disrupted, lines get longer, TSA and local police resources are diverted, and everyone is inconvenienced.

At MIA, the numbers reflect the national trend. In 2021, the Miami-Dade Police Department (MDPD) made 75 arrests for firearms at our checkpoints breaking the previous record of 60 in 2020. Tampa International Airport (TPA), Southwest Florida International Airport in Fort Myers, Orlando International (MCO) and Fort Lauderdale International Airport (FLL) have similar increases. MIA, FLL, TPA and MCO are typically in the top 10 or 11 airports across the country for passengers violating the federal law.

### **Mitigation Efforts at MIA**

So, what are the penalties and presumably the deterrents? Passengers who violate the firearms regulation face a civil penalty from the TSA that can reach as much as \$13,910 and that is up from \$10,000 just a few years ago. That fine is imposed regardless of whether the individual is cited or physically arrested and transported to jail by our law enforcement partners. If the traveler is in the TSA PreCheck® program, those privileges will be lost for a period. And repeat offenders may lose their privileges permanently.

### **Recommendations**

Can we shift the paradigm? I believe the answer is yes. At MIA we began a simple passenger education effort last Thanksgiving. In partnership with TSA, we placed high visibility signage at security checkpoints where passengers enter the queue. TSA has reached out to airlines here and encouraged them to make firearms awareness part of the ticketing transaction, either with signage or through agent-to-customer conversation. In the few months since this initiative began, we have seen guns at checkpoints go from the previous high of two (2) to three (3) per week to only three (3) in the entire month of January. While the numbers may not yet be statistically important, they do give reason to be optimistic and to seek out additional partners to educate the public.

In closing, I am grateful for the opportunity to provide the views of MIA on this very important issue and how we can minimize operational impacts moving forward and appreciate your attention to this matter.

Thank you for your consideration and the opportunity to testify.