Testimony of Acting Inspector General John V. Kelly

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Committee on Homeland Security

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"The TSA Workforce Crisis: A Homeland Security Risk"

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DHS OIG HIGHLIGHTS

"The TSA Workforce Crisis: A Homeland Security Risk"

Why We Did This Audit

TSOs are integral to improving aviation security at our Nation's airports by identifying prohibited objects in bags, in cargo, and on passengers. Therefore, TSA must retain, hire, and train its TSOs with the requisite skills and abilities to help protect the Nation from aviation security risks. We conducted this audit to determine the extent to which TSA retains, hires, and trains TSOs to accomplish its screening mission.

What We Recommend

We made nine recommendations that, when implemented, should help TSA improve TSO retention, hiring, and training.

What We Found

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) needs to continue to improve its retention, hiring, and training of Transportation Security Officers (TSOs). Specifically, TSA needs to better address its retention challenges because it currently does not share and leverage results of TSO exit surveys and does not always convey job expectations to new-hires. Prior to August 2018, TSA did not always focus on TSO career growth. Thus, the agency may be missing opportunities to prevent early attrition. By improving its retention efforts, TSA could save funds otherwise spent to hire and train new TSOs.

Furthermore, TSA does not fully evaluate applicants for capability as well as compatibility when hiring new TSOs. Thus, the agency may be making uninformed hiring decisions due to inadequate applicant information and a lack of formally documented guidance on ranking potential new-hires. Without complete information, TSA may not be selecting the most highly qualified individuals as TSOs.

Prior to July 2018, TSA had not standardized the approach for training new TSOs before they attend basic training and did not consistently send TSOs to basic training immediately following onboarding. TSA also does not give all airports complete visibility into its basic training curriculum as a basis for training new-hires locally. Without an experienced workforce or a consistent, robust training program, TSA is missing opportunities to strengthen its workforce. Given the importance of TSOs fulfilling the aviation security mission, TSA must address its retention, hiring, and training challenges, which could save millions in taxpayers' dollars.

TSA Response

TSA concurred with all nine recommendations and initiated corrective actions to address the findings.

Chairman Correa, Ranking Member Lesko, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me today to discuss the recent work of the Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General (OIG) related to the Transportation Security Administration's (TSA) Transportation Security Officer (TSO) workforce. In my testimony today, I am pleased to share the results of our office's recent work, in which we identified challenges facing TSA in retaining, hiring, and training its TSOs.[1]

TSA's mission is to protect our Nation's transportation systems to ensure freedom of movement for people and commerce. A professional, motivated, and dedicated workforce is vital to mission success. At the end of fiscal year 2017, TSA had about 61,400 employees, of which more than 34,200 (56 percent) were entry-level TSOs. TSA relies on TSOs to ensure the safety of air travelers by identifying prohibited objects in bags, in cargo, and on passengers to prevent those objects from getting onto aircraft — a difficult and complex job. Therefore, hindrances to TSA's ability to hire qualified applicants and retain experienced staff who are adequately trained has both financial and security-related implications. History shows terrorists are capable of attacking in many different ways. As threats change, TSA pursues advanced technology for detection. This requires that TSOs learn and operate new equipment with revised procedures to safeguard the traveling public. Failure to address and overcome these challenges could affect the overall safety of air travelers and the entire aviation transportation system.

In our report, we noted that TSA[2] has difficulty retaining TSOs because it does not share and leverage results of TSO exit surveys and does not always convey job expectations to new-hires. As a result, TSA may be missing opportunities to prevent early attrition. By improving its retention efforts, TSA could save funds otherwise spent to hire and train new TSOs. We also reported that, when hiring new TSOs, TSA does not fully evaluate applicants' capability and compatibility. The resultant inadequate applicant information combined with a lack of formally documented guidance for ranking potential new-hires may lead to uninformed hiring decisions. Without complete information, TSA may also not be selecting the most highly qualified individuals. Finally, although TSA now has a standardized approach to training new TSOs, we reported that, prior to July 2018, TSA did not have such an approach and did not consistently send TSOs to basic training immediately after onboarding. Our audit also showed

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[1] *TSA Needs to Improve Efforts to Retain, Hire, and Train its Transportation Security Officers,* OIG-19-35 (March 2019)

[2] Our scope focused on federalized airports, not the privatized airports, also referred to as the Screening Partnership Program (SPP).

that TSA was not giving all airports visibility into its basic training curriculum for them to use as a basis to train newly hired TSOs locally. The lack of consistent, robust training program means TSA is missing opportunities to strengthen its workforce and create a cadre of experienced TSOs. I am pleased to report that TSA concurred with all nine of our recommendations and began taking actions to implement them, which are detailed later in this testimony.

In many of our previous reports stemming from covert testing and other audits related to TSO performance and training, we identified issues at TSA that diminish its ability to retain personnel and lead to high employee turnover. These issues include low workforce morale, staffing and scheduling challenges, inadequate management of employees, high attrition rates, and relatively low pay for TSOs. In response to the recommendations in our previous reports[3], TSA has taken steps to address these issues, but as we recently reported, some challenges persist.

Training Deficiencies May Lead to Security Risks

As threats change, TSA pursues advanced detection technology, which requires TSOs to learn revised procedures and operate new equipment to safeguard the traveling public. If new, inexperienced TSOs are not adequately and consistently trained, air travelers' safety can be put at risk. In our recent report, we found that TSA lacked a standard approach to training prior to TSO attendance at Basic Training Program (BTP), which it has sought to correct. We also determined that airport training managers did not have visibility into the TSO basic training curriculum.

Before July 2018, TSA did not have a standardized approach for training new TSOs before they attended the BTP and did not consistently send TSOs to basic training immediately following onboarding. TSA did take steps to rectify these issues by standardizing its approach.

Although TSA has standardized its training approach, personnel in TSA's Training and Development office did not give all airport training managers complete visibility into the TSO BTP curriculum so they could use it as a basis to train newly hired TSOs. At the time of our audit, at least 5 of the 12 airports we visited were not able to access the TSO BTP curriculum. Without knowing the content of the BTP curriculum, airport training managers would not be able to improve TSO skills and performance with appropriate local training.

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[3] The reports include: *Covert Testing of TSA's Screening Checkpoint Effectiveness* OIG-17-112, September 2017, and *TSA's Management of Its Screening Workforce Training Program Can Be Improved* OIG-11-05, October 2010.

TSA Does Not Use All Available Resources to Retain TSOs

TSA' inability to retain TSOs and reduce turnover has a financial impact. During FYs 2016–17, TSA hired more than 19,300 TSOs to address vacancies and anticipated attrition, but during the same period lost more than 15,500. Every year, TSA spends millions of dollars to hire and train new TSOs to replace those who leave. In FY 2017, TSA obligated about $3.5 billion for TSO screening operations, which was about 41 percent of TSA's funding.[4] The $3.5 billion included costs for screening personnel, compensation, benefits, and training. During the same year, TSA hired more than 9,600 TSOs, costing the component approximately $75 million in hiring and training costs.

TSA continues to struggle with attrition across all sizes of airports. For example, the three largest category airports, representing 92 percent of the TSO workforce, have an attrition rate of approximately 17 percent. The smallest categories of airports, representing 8 percent of the TSO workforce, have an attrition rate of approximately 19 percent. A large portion of the new hired TSO officer workforce were part time employees who had a 26 percent attrition rate. Smaller airports may only have four TSO positions, whereas larger airports may have more than 1,000 TSO positions. According to TSA airport officials, TSOs at smaller airports may leave due to limited career growth opportunities and scheduling challenges. TSA has identified some challenges to retaining TSOs and has taken actions to address them, for example, by offering retention incentives in some cities. However, the component has not yet used all available resources to retain TSOs and reduce turnover.

First, TSA does not fully utilize TSO exit surveys and the data collected in TSO exit surveys to determine how to enhance the TSO work experience. In addition, TSA airport officials do not consistently conduct exit interviews when TSOs leave. As TSOs depart, officials may collect limited information, but it is not always used to address weaknesses that may be contributing to TSO turnover.

At the time of our audit, TSA's Human Capital office analyzed the results of exit surveys for common themes and presented the information to TSA senior officials, but it did not share survey results with airport management for more comprehensive analysis. Additionally, TSA did not fully analyze survey responses, especially from high-turnover employees, such as part-time personnel and those with less than 6 months experience.

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[4] FY 2017 TSA obligational authority was $8.4 billion, which does not include $2.8 billion for aviation security and credentialing fees collected. According to a TSA official, obligational authority is the authority provided by law to incur financial obligations that will result in outlays.

Our review of TSA exit survey results from more than 10,000 respondents from FYs 2012–17 showed common themes, most of which TSA airport official corroborated during our interviews. These common themes included dissatisfaction with career advancement opportunities and issues with management's competence and communication. The most common responses identified in these exit surveys related to dissatisfaction with the TSO role, including career advancement, management, scheduling, and pay.

Second, according to TSA airport officials we interviewed, some TSOs leave shortly after starting because they do not fully understand scheduling demands or the daily tasks of the job, such as the details of pat-down procedures. We found that TSA had available, but did not require airports to use, means of communicating job expectations to applicants. Such means include a Realistic Job Preview video and an optional conversation prior to scheduling the Airport Assessment or prior to check-in on the day of the Airport Assessment.

Third, TSA did not consistently focus on career development opportunities for TSOs to promote interest and long-term loyalty. At some airports we visited, we obtained an understanding of best practices related to career development such as promotions and the opportunity to take roles outside of screening operations. At 6 of 12 airports visited, TSA airport officials agreed that lack of career advancement affected TSO attrition. TSA has taken steps to address this issue. In August 2018, TSA implemented the first phase of TSO Career Progression, which provides newly hired entry-level officers a career path with pay increases tied to enhanced skills and training. Under TSO Career Progression, newly hired TSOs must successfully complete standardized training locally and then attend training at the TSA Academy within a certain period of onboarding.

Fourth, staffing shortages affect retention. TSA officials reported they were short staffed because not enough applicants were in the hiring pipeline. TSA officials from one airport we visited expressed concerns about staffing according to the airport's Resource Allocation Plan.[5] In the second quarter of FY 2018, the airport was staffed at 87 percent. An official at the same airport said that even though TSA offers overtime shifts to fill scheduling gaps resulting from staff shortages, the airport has difficulty filling those overtime shifts. In our opinion, excessive use of overtime, which could be mitigated by

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[5] Security Operations provides a Resource Allocation Plan to each airport based upon data, such as passenger volume and targeted wait times. This plan estimates the number of full-time equivalents necessary to meet these demands.

competitive salaries and adequate staffing levels, could also result in lower job satisfaction and morale, and therefore higher turnover.

Finally, low pay has an impact on TSA's ability to retain TSOs. During our audit, airport hiring personnel said they had difficulty competing with local economic conditions. Exit surveys cited pay as one of the most common reasons employees leave TSA. According to a 2014 TSA memo, front-line TSOs were the lowest paid operational personnel in TSA's workforce. TSO pay is limited to the TSA pay bands allotted for the position. Officials from two hard-to-hire airports said TSOs often leave to find job opportunities that offer the same or higher pay. When comparing the most recent Census Bureau data for cities in which these two hard-to-hire airports are located, TSA pays TSOs as much as 31 percent below the per capita income amount.

By improving its retention efforts, TSA could save millions of taxpayer dollars spent hiring and training new TSOs. Attrition costs include the costs of replacing those who leave by hiring and training new staff, as well as losses associated with productivity, institutional knowledge, decreased employee morale, and potential performance gaps as new staff take time to learn to fully perform in their job.

<u>TSA Has Not Fully Pursued All Options to Ensure It Hires Qualified TSOs</u>

TSA has not pursued all options for fully evaluating applicants to ensure it hires qualified staff. For example, TSA could enhance its current competency tests. During the Computer-Based Test (CBT)[6] and interview, TSA assesses competencies, such as oral communication, attention to detail, conflict management, critical thinking, flexibility, integrity, honesty, teamwork, and situational awareness. TSA could potentially enhance the CBT by including personality tests and practice tests given at colleges to determine fitness for TSO positions. Additionally, TSA could enhance its structured interview, which consists of seven competencies validated as critical for the position, including flexibility, teamwork, and oral communication. According to TSA personnel at one airport, the interview portion limits their ability to disqualify applicants because interviewer has to follow scripts during the interview and have little latitude on what they can tell the candidate. The interviewer does not have the ability to say the candidate is not a good fit, for example, if he arrives late and is dressed inappropriately. TSA personnel at another airport said the interview questions do not assess the ability to perform actual TSO duties.

The TSA Human Capital office has started an initiative to develop and implement a valid assessment to strengthen the TSO applicant pool by

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[6] The CBT comprises a Screener English Test and a Screener Object Recognition Test.

identifying applicants least and most likely to be a good fit for the position. In April 2018, TSA officials completed research on the potential effectiveness of assessing job compatibility during the hiring process. TSA officials said the job compatibility assessment is a pre-employment suitability screening that focuses on personality-related, motivational, and attitudinal competencies that are critical for job performance. The Human Capital office plans to complete this initiative and incorporate the assessment into the hiring process in the fall of 2019. Additional enhancements to improve the evaluation process include personality tests, practice tests, and asking structured interviews to better evaluate an applicant's ability to perform TSO duties.

TSA also lacks supporting documentation for applicants. Airports could not provide documentation showing applicants passed all steps in the hiring process. Without these documents, TSA could not verify these applicants met the qualifications to be eligible for job offers. Additionally, TSA lacked formal criteria and clear guidance describing the Certification List[7] ranking process used by the TSO Cert Tool.[8] Without this evidence, we could not verify whether TSA programmed its TSO Cert Tool correctly. As a result, TSA airport personnel may not be contacting and extending job offers to the most qualified applicants.

Conclusion

We have previously reported many findings and recommendations in prior Department of Homeland Security OIG covert testing and other audit reports specific to TSO performance and training. TSA continues to work on improving its workforce's capability to address security risks and vulnerabilities. We believe TSO retention and training challenges are contributing factors to airport security weaknesses. Human performance and sound judgment are critical factors in protecting the Nation against terrorist attacks, thus highlighting the importance of retaining experienced TSOs, hiring qualified TSOs, and training the workforce appropriately to secure our airports.

Given TSO's integral role in ensuring the Nation's aviation system security, including the safety of millions of air travelers, TSA must hire highly qualified applicants who are comprehensively trained and motivated to remain in their positions long-term. In our report, we identified challenges to achieving these

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[7] The Certification List is a list of eligible applicants used to select individuals for employment. TSA selecting officials at the airports make job offers to applicants in the order in which they appear on the Certification Lists ranking from best qualified, highly qualified, and qualified.

[8] The TSO Cert Tool uses a numeric score for each applicant derived from the Screener Object Recognition Test portion of the CBT and airport interview to rank applicants into qualified categories on a Certification List.

goals. By addressing and overcoming these challenges, TSA will be able to maintain a fully capable and experienced TSO workforce and realize cost savings while effectively accomplishing its vital mission.

As a result of our audit we made nine recommendations to TSA aimed at improving retention, hiring, and training of TSOs. I am happy to report that TSA concurred with all nine of our recommendations and has taken steps to implement them. Specifically, we closed three recommendations because TSA implemented the first phase of TSO Career Progression, sent a message to airports reminding them to follow TSA records retention policies, and is enforcing the pre-Basic Training Program training requirements. Based on information we received recently from TSA, we are working to close a fourth recommendation to give all airports access to the entire Basic Training Program curriculum. Four additional recommendations are resolved, but open pending receipt of further information from TSA. These are recommendations to improve the TSO hiring process, revise the exit survey process, examine pay increases based on TSO skill level, and document system functional requirements, such as the rating process criteria. Finally, our recommendation to TSA to review and develop recruitment and retention strategies to continue to review for reducing attrition at smaller airports; and among part-time TSOs is unresolved because we do not agree with TSA's proposed corrective action plan. The actions TSA described during the recruitment process in their response to the recommendation do not specifically address the intent of the recommendation.

Below is a summary of our recommendations, as well as TSA's corrective actions.

Summary of Recommendations and TSA Corrective Actions

1. We recommended that TSA improve the hiring process to ensure applicants are informed of TSO duties and that TSA continue to hire qualified applicants. In response, TSA said it would mandate that personnel scheduling the Airport Assessment review an airport's hours of operations, typical shifts and days off, and typical duties of the position. Applicants will be required to watch the TSO Realistic Job Preview. TSA plans to include a compatibility assessment tool in the TSO hiring process by September 30, 2019. (Recommendation is resolved and open.)

2. We recommended that TSA revise the exit survey process to ensure airports offer local exit interviews, record results in a centralized system, provide access to the results, and address areas identified in the results that would help retain a skilled and knowledgeable TSO workforce. In Fall 2018, TSA released a new Workforce Surveys iShare site, which

includes a page dedicated to the National Exit Survey. All TSA employees have access to this page and are able to view survey information and TSA-wide results and can run custom reports. Employees can also use the iShare site to access action planning tools and best practices. As needed, TSA will engage with airports to facilitate local action planning focus groups. Additionally, TSA will randomly evaluate these efforts. The estimated completion date is September 30, 2019. To ensure airports offer local exit interviews, the Human Capital office and Security Operations will broadcast a message to airport leadership reminding them of this requirement. The estimated completion date is April 30, 2019. (Recommendation is resolved and open.)

3. We recommended that TSA continue to review and develop <u>recruitment and retention strategies</u> for reducing attrition at smaller airports and among part-time TSOs. TSA planned to implement its TSO Career Progression, announced in August 2018. TSA also said it uses retention incentives to augment TSO pay at duty stations with retention and recruitment challenges and, during the recruitment process, markets the benefits of Federal employment and promotes TSO positions as an entry point to a Federal career. TSA has also implemented additional recruitment strategies and approaches, such as sponsored social media and digital advertising. OIG responded that TSO Career Progression and retention incentives may help retain TSOs, but recruitment process actions described do not specifically address the intent of the recommendation. *This recommendation remains unresolved and open because we did not agree with TSA's proposed corrective action plan.*

4. TSA responded with a variety of overall recruitment and retention strategies such as marketing on social media, implementation of TSO Career Progression, use of retention incentives to augment TSO pay at duty stations with retention and recruitment challenges, and marketing the benefits of Federal employment to prospective applicants. We recognize that TSO Career Progression, implemented in August 2018, and retention incentives may assist with retention of officers, including those who are part-time or located at smaller airports. However, actions described during the recruitment process do not specifically address the intent of the recommendation

5. We recommended that TSA meet established timelines to implement the first phase of <u>TSO Career Progression</u> for newly appointed entry-level TSOs. TSA implemented the first phase of TSO Career Progression on

August 5, 2018 for TSOs hired on or after that date. (Recommendation is closed.)

6. We recommended that TSA examine <u>pay increases based TSO skill level</u> to help attract and retain a strong workforce. TSA explained that TSO Career Progression, implemented in August 2018, is a strategic and comprehensive approach establishing a clearly defined and transparent career path for employees, with pay increases tied to enhanced skills and training for the TSA front line workforce. TSA also completed an officer compensation analysis, the results of which TSA will use to consider changes to the existing TSO pay structure. The estimated completion date is June 30, 2019. (Recommendation is resolved and open.)

7. We recommended that TSA remind airports to follow <u>TSA records retention</u> policies for Airport Assessment documentation. On October 2, 2018, TSA sent a message to airport hiring points of contact. (Recommendation is closed.)

8. We recommended that TSA formally <u>document system functional requirements</u>, such as the rating process criteria, to ensure proper system logic in ranking applicants on Certification Lists. TSA will create a comprehensive Systems Functional Requirements Document for any new systems and update it to include rating process criteria in the TSO Cert Tool. The estimated completion date is September 30, 2019. (Recommendation is resolved and open.)

9. We recommended that TSA enforce the <u>pre-Basic Training Program training requirements</u>. As of August 2018, all TSOs hired receive the same standardized local training prior to attending a second phase of training at FLETC. Prior to attending FLETC, TSOs complete an Academy-ready checklist, which the airport maintains. This checklist ensures training completion. (Recommendation is closed.)

10. We recommended that TSA give all airports <u>access to the entire Basic Training Program curriculum</u>. (TSA recently provided an update. We are working to close this recommendation.)

We will continue to approach our work with dedication and urgency and will keep Congress fully informed of our findings and recommendations, consistent with our obligations under the *Inspector General Act of 1978.*

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I am happy to answer any questions you or other members of the Subcommittee may have.

Thank you.