Written Testimony for Lance Lyttle
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United States House Homeland Security Committee
Transportation & Maritime Security Subcommittee

"The TSA Workforce Crisis: A Homeland Security Risk"
May 21, 2019

Thank you, Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Rogers, Chairman Correa, Ranking Member Lesko, and members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify today on the importance of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) workforce to the efficient, secure and reliable operation of airports. It is an honor for me to be here.

My name is Lance Lyttle, and I am the Managing Director of Seattle-Tacoma International Airport (Sea-Tac). Before I address today's topic, let me start by providing some context about our airport, both in terms of our region and the passengers we serve.

Sea-Tac serves one of the hottest economies in the country. With innovative companies such as Amazon, Boeing, Microsoft and Starbucks along with disruptive start-ups in biotechnology, global health, retail, manufacturing and information technology, the Seattle region's economy is booming and has one of the fastest growing populations in the country.

The unemployment rate in our county is now at 3.6% as of March 2019. That figure contributes to a highly competitive job market, which is driving wage increases from employers large and small. In addition, both the City of Seattle and the City of SeaTac (where our airport is located) have instituted $15 minimum wages.

This regional economic growth has been a major factor in making Sea-Tac the 8th busiest airport in the country in terms of passenger volumes, increasing from approximately 31 million travelers served in 2010 to almost 50 million last year. We are proud of the role we serve in the region's ongoing economic vitality – making travel to and from the Seattle region convenient, accessible and affordable – but this growth is straining the capacity of our airport and specifically our security checkpoints.

One of our airport's top priorities is ensuring swift and reliable processing at TSA passenger screening checkpoints. We see this need both as a customer service issue as well as a security issue – avoiding long lines of travelers on the public side of the airport who become potential soft targets. When we have lines that stretch through the terminal, past the ticket counters, over the skybridges and into the parking garages, our ability to ensure perimeter security is compromised, to say the least.

Unfortunately, we have seen that exact scenario on a regular basis at Sea-Tac, even before we enter our summer peak travel period. Average wait times – based on how we measure wait

times, which is different than TSA – are often double our twenty-minute goal for throughput. This summer we expect to regularly see over 70,000 travelers per day at TSA checkpoints.

Our terminal facilities are certainly insufficient for the processing of that many travelers, but there is no doubt that the ability of TSA to hire and retain sufficient staffing is also a major contributor to this challenge. In my time at Sea-Tac, TSA has never had the staff to open every single screening lane at our airport. We believe that opening every lane would allow TSA to process approximately 5,800 passengers per hour, which is about what we see on a peak travel day. And so, it becomes a math problem: do we have those lanes open to process passengers in a timely manner, or do we have long wait times, compromised security, frustrated travelers and missed flights?

Ensuring sufficient staffing to fully open our checkpoints is not necessarily a Congressional or a TSA budget issue, but rather the result of local TSA management having an incredibly difficult time hiring to meet its allocated staffing number. In fact, at Sea-Tac, TSA loses Transportation Security Officers (TSOs) almost as fast as it hires them. A Bloomberg Law study found that – between 2012 to 2016 – TSA hired 858 TSOs at Sea-Tac but lost 772. This is a 90% attrition rate. Over the last two months alone, as many as 80 TSOs have left Sea-Tac for other positions in the region.

I point this out not as a criticism of local TSA leadership but simply to highlight the incredible challenge they face. Despite their best efforts with hiring fairs and recruiting bonuses, a hot local economy and a $15 minimum wage mean that someone can choose relatively equally between working at any entry-level job in the local economy and protecting our nation's aviation security. And the alternative job often doesn't require the same challenges as being a TSO, in terms of both customer interactions and security responsibilities.

Sea-Tac is not alone in facing TSO hiring and retention challenges. While we certainly have unique aspects of our economy, several other regions throughout the country have highlighted these issues – from Minneapolis-St. Paul to Denver to Boston to Nashville. It is no coincidence that these are all fast-growing regions, both in terms of their economies and their populations, which makes TSO hiring difficult.

The recent news of TSA staffing needs at the U.S. southern border has all of us in the airport industry very concerned. Any significant diversion of TSOs away from our airport reduces the likelihood that TSA will be able to open all 31 of our security lanes during morning peak this summer. Given our current staffing levels, major reassignment of screeners could result in passenger screening lines out to our parking garage as often as four to five days per week this summer.

Before I go any further, I want to take a moment to share our appreciation for the commitment of our local TSA workforce. Thanks to their dedication, we avoided TSO staffing challenges at Sea-Tac during the federal government shutdown at the beginning of this year. The dedication with which TSOs came to work every day – regardless of the financial pressures they faced

without a paycheck – was truly awe-inspiring, and we are deeply grateful for their professionalism and positive attitude during what must have been an incredibly stressful time. We were honored to be able to celebrate and support them during this period with donations from the community.

I also want to acknowledge that TSA leadership has been very engaged with us on the staffing and retention issues at Sea-Tac. TSA Administrator Pekoske earlier this year approved a temporary increase in wages for TSOs in economies like Seattle, and Sea-Tac TSOs now start at more than $20 per hour. We deeply value the collaborative relationship we have with TSA, and their partnership with us on providing effective security while minimizing wait times at our airport. TSA leadership plans to assign 50 temporary National Deployment Force (NDF) TSOs to our airport this summer to help counterbalance the shortage in permanent staffing.

However, a major international hub airport like ours cannot rely on temporary measures to solve our wait times issues. TSA needs to be fully, permanently staffed at our airport to handle our growing passenger volumes, and the most effective way to achieve that goal is to increase retention rates. Not only is it expensive to keep hiring new TSOs, but it can take months for a new officer to be fully certified to perform all regulatory functions; at our airport right now, there are over 50 level 1 and level 2 TSOs who are limited to exit lane staffing, divestiture, travel document checking and other basic functions. These new hires then wait for a slot at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in Glynco, Georgia and must be away from the airport for several weeks to get trained. Lower turnover rates – combined with decreased cycle times for recruitment, hiring and training – will lead to more efficient and effective TSA officers who can help us meet both our throughput and customer service goals. Perhaps more importantly, we know that those officers will also be better at ensuring security at our airport and for our travelers.

As a side note, one of the reasons that we are so concerned about staffing levels is that changes to protocols for TSA passenger screening canines have made that resource significantly less efficient. These dogs used to be our solution to compensate for staffing shortages, because they could double the throughput of screening lanes. With the new operational directive – which I fully appreciate was done for security reasons – these canines only provide a modest increase in efficiency. I share this development not to ask for a change in canine protocols, but to point out that staffing levels are now the primary tool in our toolbox for addressing wait time issues, other than incremental technology improvements.

The other impact of TSA staffing shortages has been on the airport's own resources. Because of long wait times and our focus on ensuring a positive customer experience, Sea-Tac has made significant investments of its own money: adding additional lanes at existing checkpoints, installing exit lane technology and Automated Screening Lanes, and even providing Port and contractor staffing on a voluntary and temporary basis to perform non-regulatory functions – such as exit lanes, queue management and divestiture – so that TSOs are freed up for core responsibilities. We cannot afford to continue to shoulder this burden.

Let me close by saying that I don't have all the solutions to the challenges that TSA faces in hiring and retaining its workforce. As I've mentioned, the factors impacting this challenge – particularly for an airport like ours – are diverse and complicated, and there clearly isn't one magic solution. My goal today is simply to help explain how TSA workforce issues directly impact airports and their travelers.

I do believe, however, that higher compensation is an important part of the puzzle, because of the natural experiment taking place at our airport. Sea-Tac is one of the few airports in the country that conducts full employee screening, requiring all airport workers traveling to the sterile side of the airport to go through a security screening process that is similar to a TSA checkpoint. To handle this work, the Port of Seattle has hired close to 80 employees – represented by the ILWU – as our Full Employee Screening (FES) team. Those FES employees receive a starting wage of $21.71 per hour, and we have had extremely little turnover in those jobs. Of course, the FES checkpoint is much less challenging than a TSA checkpoint because of the travelers themselves, but the analogy is certainly indicative.

Our vision for Sea-Tac is a world-class security and customer experience, and that's why we're committed to meeting our region's growing air travel demand with an improved level of service: addressing road and curbside congestion, minimizing terminal crowding and reducing airfield delay. We want our travelers to enjoy our exciting new dining and retail offerings, not be stuck waiting in a security line. And we certainly don't want large groups of people on the soft side of the airport creating a potential target for those with bad intentions. Sufficient TSA staffing is an essential component to those goals, and I welcome the opportunity to work with all of you to achieve them.

Thank you again for the opportunity today, and I look forward to any questions you may have.