



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Hearing Statement of Transportation & Maritime Security Subcommittee Chairwoman Bonnie Watson Coleman (D-NJ)

Concealed Carry-Ons: Confronting the Surge in Firearms at TSA Checkpoints

February 15, 2022

Thank you to our witnesses for joining us today to discuss the surging number of firearms at TSA checkpoints. Unfortunately, this topic could not be more timely. Last year, TSA caught nearly 6,000 firearms at checkpoints nationwide – a new and unprecedented record. That’s an average of 16 guns that TSA prevented from boarding a plane each day. Most disturbingly, 86% of these guns were loaded.

In 2020, TSA caught ten firearms per million passengers screened, compared to five per million in 2019. On a per-passenger basis, that’s a 100-percent increase in just one year. The good news is that TSA has a talented workforce and top-notch technologies that are keeping us safe. But the bad news is that it only takes a single gun slipping through for tragedy to ensue. The deadly consequences of a hijacker bringing a loaded firearm on a plane are not difficult to imagine.

Even when TSA successfully interdicts a weapon, transportation workers and the traveling public face dangers. Just a few months ago in Atlanta, a passenger accidentally discharged his firearm at a checkpoint – resulting in chaos, injuries, and flight delays. And of course, we cannot forget the horrific incidents involving gunmen deliberately targeting airports.

We honor the memory of Gerardo Hernandez, a TSO in Los Angeles who was shot for simply doing his job and died in the line of duty. We also remember the five people who were killed standing at a baggage claim in Fort Lauderdale. The status quo is simply unacceptable. The increase in unruly passenger incidents alongside the increase in firearms injected into the aviation environment make for a toxic combination. We need to explore a range of solutions to keep guns off planes and away from TSA checkpoints.

An important piece of this conversation is raising awareness of the laws on the books. Responsible firearm owners follow the law. They know that if you want to fly with a firearm, you can declare it to the airline and ship it in your checked baggage. Yet time and time again, when TSA catches passengers with guns in their carry-on, most passengers say they forgot their gun was in their bag. In those cases, TSA and airports can play an important role in educating passengers. Prominent and consistent signage – and expanded public awareness campaigns – can ensure everyone knows the rules, and that responsible firearm owners follow established procedures.

TSA can and should also explore steps to increase deterrence. To that end, I am looking forward to hearing our witnesses’ thoughts on the sufficiency of the current fines, PreCheck suspensions, and other consequences TSA imposes on passengers bringing firearms to checkpoints. Bringing a firearm to a checkpoint is a Federal crime. If you intend to bring a gun on a plane, you can go to prison for it. But intent is very hard for prosecutors to prove, which is why it is so important that TSA use the regulatory tools at its disposal to make passengers think twice before packing that weapon in their carry-on.

This should not be a partisan issue. This is not about gun control, but about aviation security. We must all stand together in support of keeping loaded pistols off planes. TSA has an impressive record of catching firearms, but we have gone from approximately 1,000 firearms found at checkpoints in 2010 to nearly 6,000 last year. That is a six-fold increase in little more than a decade. If and when something unthinkable happens, we can hardly act surprised. And it simply should not take a tragedy – whether it’s a hijacking or an accidental discharge that claims a life – to trigger action.

I stand ready to work with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle, and our witnesses today, to keep our aviation system secure. Our panel brings important perspectives to this conversation. The surge in firearms at TSA checkpoints disrupts airport operations, endangers the frontline workforce and travelers, and diverts law enforcement resources from where they are needed. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses on how we can all work together to solve this challenge. With that, I now recognize the Ranking Member of the Subcommittee, the Gentleman from Florida, for an opening statement.

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Media contact: Adam Comis at (202) 225-9978