

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Kathleen Rice (D-NY)

Subcommittee on Transportation Security

Hearing “Risk-Based Security: Assessing the Path Forward for TSA PreCheck”

March 25, 2015

I want to take a moment to note the disturbing incident that occurred at Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport last Friday, when an individual assaulted multiple Transportation Security Officers with wasp spray and a machete. It’s a chilling reminder of the risks Transportation Security Officers face every single day on the frontlines of the effort to protect passengers and maintain the security of our nation’s aviation sector.

It’s a difficult, dangerous, and often thankless job – But I want you to know our thoughts, our prayers and our gratitude are with you all. I also want you to know that we are committed to developing solutions to enhance the security at our checkpoints – for your safety as well as that of the passengers you protect.

I thank you for convening this important hearing today so that we can examine the TSA PreCheck Program. The TSA PreCheck Program, as I understand it, is one of TSA’s risk-based initiatives, aiming to maintain effective security while also maximizing efficiency.

When the Aviation and Transportation Security Act became law, it authorized TSA to “establish requirements to implement trusted passenger programs and use available technologies to expedite the security screening of passengers who participate in such programs.”

This allows TSA to vet passengers on the front end through the PreCheck application process. Those passengers can go through expedited screening, and TSA can allocate resources on the ground to focus on travelers who we know less about, or suspect of criminal intent.

I understand that more than one million people have now voluntarily submitted their biographic information in order to participate in this trusted traveler program. That makes sense to me – that seems like an appropriate balance between effectiveness and efficiency.

But I also understand that certain populations who have NOT undergone this vetting on the front end are, nonetheless, sometimes permitted to use the expedited PreCheck screening lanes. That doesn’t make sense to me – that suggests to me that the balance sometimes tips too far towards efficiency, maybe at the expense of effective security.

Certainly, that was the case when a convicted felon and former member of a domestic terrorist organization was permitted to use a PreCheck lane, as we learned from last week’s report by the Department of Homeland Security’s Office of Inspector General. That kind of breach is simply inexcusable.

Of course it’s beneficial to use PreCheck so that we can concentrate our resources on passengers who are unknown to us and pose the highest potential risk. But when a passenger such as this individual – who

WAS known to us and clearly posed enormous risk – is given access to the PreCheck lane, it demands that we take a hard look at the methods being used to calculate that risk.

So that's why we're here today – to examine the risks of expanding PreCheck beyond pre-vetted, pre-approved passengers; to reassess the methodology used to assign a person to a given risk category; and to ensure that we never allow the pursuit of efficiency to compromise security.

I look forward to hearing from Mr. Fletcher – his testimony mentions that TSA is currently working to expand PreCheck to other low-risk populations. I'm eager to hear about those efforts, and about what methodology can ensure that these populations are indeed low risk and don't pose a threat to our aviation security.

I want to thank Inspector General Roth for being here and for his report last week on the security breach I mentioned earlier. I look forward to hearing more details about how this incident transpired, as well as his recommendations on how we can prevent such a breach from ever occurring in the future.

I would also like to thank Jennifer Grover for being here to represent the Government Accountability Office, which has compiled a significant body of work regarding the use of risk based security.

I look forward to hearing from Ms. Grover and Inspector General Roth about the security implications of expanding the use of PreCheck expedited screening beyond passengers who have undergone the application process, as well as their recommendations for how we can make this program more secure going forward.

We are currently working with Ranking Member Thompson on legislation that will be introduced, and our hope is that the information we gather through today's hearing will better inform that measure.