

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

Subcommittee on Transportation Security

Hearing Titled “How TSA Can Improve Aviation Worker Vetting”

June 15, 2015

We have an important question to answer today: how can we do a better job vetting aviation workers – how can we do a better job ensuring that criminals and terrorists cannot get a job in one of our airports and gain access to secure areas.

Clearly, if a terrorist were to penetrate an airport in that way, the results could be catastrophic. We have to assume that right now, someone is trying to do just that. We have to assume that we can prevent it. And we have to keep working together, aggressively and proactively, to strengthen our security, find and close the gaps, and stay one step ahead.

TSA is responsible for vetting diverse groups of people – from the Transit Worker Identification Credential program, to PreCheck, to aviation worker programs. Aviation workers themselves are a diverse group of people who play many different and important roles within the commercial airport environment – from the person who works at the newsstand beyond the security checkpoints, to the mechanic who has to access the plane itself to perform his or her duties.

What these two people have in common is that they both go to work every day beyond the checkpoints, in the secure area of the airport. And we have to do everything within our power to ensure that people who go to work in these secure areas are exhaustively vetted – both before employment and on a recurring basis – and prove themselves to be trustworthy.

Last week, the Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General issued a report that detailed how 73 individuals with links to terrorism were able to get jobs with airlines and airport vendors, and were cleared to access secure areas. That’s unacceptable. First, we should all be grateful to the Inspector General’s office for bringing this to our attention. And to know that this threat was out there, to think about what could have happened – should be all the motivation we need to work together, act swiftly, and do what needs to be done to make sure this doesn’t happen again.

That’s why we’re here today – not to create a spectacle or cast blame. We’re here to figure out how this happened, what we need to learn from it, and what we need to do to close this gap in our security. I also want to point out that Inspector General Roth himself noted that TSA’s vetting process was “generally effective” – so that’s not the problem here. As far as I understand, there seem to be two main factors that allowed this to happen.

Number one – because of the current inter-agency watch-list policy, TSA doesn’t have access to databases that would have captured the individuals in question and alerted TSA to their terrorism indicators. That, too, is simply unacceptable, and has to change. TSA should have had access to all information about these individuals – TSA should have access to any and all information that will make their vetting process as exhaustive as possible.

Number two, the report also made it clear that TSA's own databases are a mess. 87,000 employee files without Social Security numbers. Many with no passport number or proof of citizenship. 300 files with no full name for the employee.

There's no excuse for that. It strikes me as sloppy, and there's no place for sloppiness when we're dealing with the security of our nation's aviation system. We strive for a security system that's airtight and precise – and in order to achieve that, our information must be airtight, everything we do must be precise.

The Inspector General's office has issued six recommendations, all of which will help to address these issues, and I appreciate the fact that TSA has concurred with these recommendations and is already taking steps to implement them.

I look forward to hearing more about these issues and corrective actions today. And, after this hearing, I look forward to taking up legislation authored by myself and Chairman Katko that will codify recommendations from this report and from another OIG report that details the need for TSA to properly manage its airport screening equipment maintenance program.

I want to thank each of our witnesses for being here today. I'm eager to hear all of your testimony and have a productive conversation about how we can do a better job vetting aviation workers – how we can do a better job keeping airports secure and keeping passengers safe.