

Statement for the Record of Rep. Bill Keating (D-MA)

Subcommittee on Transportation Security

Field Hearing “Examining Critical Security Measures, Communications, and Response at our Nation’s Airports”

October 26, 2015

Every week, I fly between my home in Massachusetts and my office in Washington, D.C. Having served on this Committee for five years and racked up my frequent flier miles, I am well aware that our airports face unique challenges among themselves.

In fact, Chairman McCaul and I led a field hearing at Logan International Airport in 2011 to discuss both individual and shared concerns expressed by airport operators, employees, and, of course, passengers. It is with this perspective that I carefully observe the security and lay outs of the airports I visit. As I left Boston and arrived in Syracuse this morning, I noted the differences between the two – from size to staffing.

This morning’s hearing provides us with an opportunity to continue the ongoing discussion over critical security, communications, and response needs of our airports outside of the walls of our Committee hearing room. Led by Chairman Katko and this Subcommittee’s Ranking Member, Congresswoman Rice, our Subcommittee has followed tragedy and triumph at airports from Atlanta to New York to Los Angeles.

Today, we find ourselves in Syracuse, where we have an opportunity to hear from two sides of the multifaceted aviation security equation – Ms. Maola, the Regional Director of TSA Region One, and Mr. Martelle, the President of the New York Aviation Management Association. No conversation surrounding airport security can continue without thorough discussion of the tragedy at Los Angeles International Airport nearly two years ago.

On November 1, 2013, a gunman entered LAX with a semi-automatic rifle, ammunition, and the specific intent to harm Transportation Security Officers. He opened fire on Transportation Security Officer Gerardo Hernandez in the action of diligently checking passenger boarding passes, killing him in cold blood. He then proceeded into the sterile area of the airport where he shot and injured two Transportation Security Officer: James Speer and Tony Grigsby.

The Los Angeles World Airport Police Department, along with numerous emergency responders, acted quickly and bravely to subdue the shooter – who injured at least six innocent bystanders. Were it not for their valiant actions, further loss of life may have been catastrophic.

If there is one silver lining in such unexplainable tragedy, it is the increased knowledge and understanding we have of our threats, our vulnerabilities, and our capacity to respond. In the aftermath of the LAX shooting, we learned that there was much to be done in terms of the preparedness for and response to active shooter and other emergency situations that may arise at our nation’s airports.

Through reviews last Congress, for instance, we learned that not all of the panic buttons and red phones utilized at checkpoints were functioning properly. And real challenges existed relating to the interoperability of communications for first responders.

I cannot underscore the importance that law enforcement agencies be able to communicate with each other, emergency care providers, the airport, and TSA in real time. How else can they ensure that responses to an emergency situation are comprehensive? And how else will those entities coordinate a response with one another?

Since the LAX shooting, we have learned that other vulnerabilities pervade aviation security efforts. Of particular interest to me is the risk posed by an airport's perimeter. This spring, the Associated Press revealed that there had been at least 268 perimeter security breaches at 31 major U.S. airports. And, TSA has calculated a total of over 1,300 perimeter security breaches at 450 domestic airports from 2001-2011.

This figure includes an incident near to my heart – when Delvonte Tisdale, a teenager from North Carolina, snuck onto the tarmac at Charlotte-Douglas International Airport and perished when the airplane on which he has stowed away dropped its wheels for landing.

But that figure does not account for continued perimeter security breaches since 2011 – including stowaways, trespassing across tarmacs, scaling of perimeter fences, and driving vehicles through barriers across airport property.

As I have often said, we are lucky that these individuals did not harbor nefarious intentions. But that does not mitigate the risk posed by such behavior to airports, employees, and, of course, the passengers and travelers who rely on TSA officers and airport operators for their security.

The LAX incident revealed yet another discrepancy in our respect for this first line of defense – TSO Hernandez lost his life doing his job protecting our nation's aviation passengers. However, as TSOs are not considered law enforcement officers under federal law, his family was not initially entitled to death benefits.

Through leadership on this Subcommittee and our full Committee, we were able to extend these benefits to his family through work with appropriations last Congress. But other TSOs still do not receive death benefits. Congresswoman Brownley of California has introduced legislation, the "Honoring Our Fallen TSA Officers Act", to rectify this discrepancy, and I hope that all will give the measure serious consideration. I, myself, am proud to be a cosponsor of this important legislation.

Further, the "Gerardo Hernandez Airport Security Act of 2015" recently became a public law. Now, TSA and DHS are directed to work with airports to develop and verify individualized plans to respond to security incidents, as well as share best practices among airports.

Further, at a recent hearing with TSA Administrator Neffenger, I confirmed that TSA is currently conducting a "top-to-bottom review" of our nation's airport security needs.

I look forward to hearing from Ms. Maola about how the Gerardo Hernandez Airport Security Act and comprehensive internal review will make airports more secure and better prepared for emergency situations in the future. I also look forward to the testimony of Jeremy Martelle of the New York Aviation Management Association regarding changes to security plans and sharing of best practices amongst New York airports.

It is our shared responsibility to mitigate, if not prevent, tragic shootings – like at LAX – or perimeter breaches – like those in San Jose, San Francisco, and Charlotte - from occurring in the future. And, I want to reiterate the importance of the work done by Transportation Security Officers, as they are working on the front lines every day to keep us safe.