



# COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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

### *Twenty Years of Workforce Challenges: The Need for H.R. 903, the Rights for the TSA Workforce Act of 2021*

May 4, 2021

Today marks the first hearing for our Subcommittee this Congress. I am excited to be chairing the Subcommittee, and I look forward to working with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to tackle the critical security challenges before us.

The challenge we have gathered to discuss today is one many of us have grappled with for years. Since TSA's establishment nearly twenty years ago, its workforce has lacked the workplace rights and protections afforded to other federal government employees. Despite the dedication and diversity of Transportation Security Officers, or TSOs, they remain among the lowest-paid workers in the entire government. We cannot wait any longer to correct this injustice. I am proud to be an original cosponsor of Chairman Thompson's H.R. 903, the Rights for the TSA Workforce Act, a common sense and bipartisan solution to one of TSA's foundational flaws.

In 2001, after the attacks of September 11th, Congress established TSA to protect the safety and security of our nation. However, by excluding TSA's workforce from Title 5, the statute failed to protect the frontline workers who uphold that mission. H.R. 903 simply applies Title 5 to the TSA workforce and ensures TSA employees stand on equal footing to their peers elsewhere in government.

The contrast between the challenging nature of TSA's work and the unfair treatment of its frontline workforce is stark as can be. Every day, TSOs screen millions of passengers and pieces of luggage, securing the public from threats to aviation security. Behind the scenes, Air Marshals, TSA Inspectors, and other essential workers perform equally critical national security tasks. In doing so, they must deal with unruly passengers, a rapidly evolving threat landscape, and in some cases, even gunmen who have specifically targeted TSA personnel.

Over the past year, TSOs have confronted new dangers. Even when faced with the prospect of coming into contact with thousands of passengers each day amid a deadly pandemic, TSOs showed up day after day at great risk to themselves and their families. To date, 16 TSA employees have tragically lost their lives to COVID-19, and approximately 7,800 personnel have tested positive. Yet unlike other federal government employees, TSA employees lack basic civil service protections.

Full collective bargaining rights? Not if you work at TSA. The ability to appeal disciplinary decisions to a neutral third party? Not if you work at TSA. Title 5 whistleblower protections? The regularly-scheduled salary increases almost all other federal workers receive? Again, not at TSA. To add insult to injury, TSOs aren't even paid under the federal government's normal wage scale – known as the GS scale. Instead, basic full-time TSO salaries can start as low as \$29,000 per year. And even after years of dedicated service, the opportunities for advancement can be far more limited than for most federal employees.

I think most Americans would be shocked to learn that the workers charged with protecting the traveling public are living paycheck-to-paycheck, struggling to pay the rent, sometimes relying on food banks, and denied basic workplace protections. These disparities come with consequences. And those consequences impact TSA's ability to fulfill its homeland security mission. While their salaries are low, turnover and attrition rates among frontline TSA personnel are high. Each time a TSO quits because of inadequate pay and workplace rights, TSA then needs to spend money recruiting and training a new officer.

According to the Department of Homeland Security Office of the Inspector General, in 2017 TSA spent \$16 million on new hires who left within six months. Wouldn't these resources be better spent ensuring TSOs are compensated and treated fairly in the first place, so they are incentivized to stay and grow their careers at TSA? But rectifying these wrongs is not just about improving retention and morale at TSA. Fundamentally, it is also about equity and fairness.

The diversity of its workforce is one of TSA's greatest assets. 55% of TSA employees come from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. This means that when our laws single out TSA workers for disparate treatment – denying them the compensation and protections other federal government employees receive – people of color bear the brunt of the consequences. When the 2019 government shutdown occurred and TSOs were required to show up for work without receiving a paycheck, this extraordinary burden was disproportionately placed on members of marginalized communities. So instead of maintaining a personnel system that treats TSA's workers as "second class," we should be exploring ways to help these workers enter the leadership pipeline and diversify DHS as a whole.

Passing H.R. 903 will send a powerful message to the TSA workforce that they are anything but "second class." They are the frontline of our nation's transportation security. They are essential workers. And their dedication will be rewarded with respect and dignity. Simply put, H.R. 903 is about workers' rights, civil rights, and enhancing our nation's security. It is supported by members of both parties and its benefits will flow to communities all across our nation. The TSA workforce deserves to be treated equally.

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