

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****Ranking Member Thompson Hearing Statement:*****Long Lines, Short Patience: The TSA Airport Screening Experience***

May 25, 2016 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) released the following opening statement for the full Committee hearing: “Long Lines, Short Patience: The TSA Airport Screening Experience”:

“To be clear, the flying public expects and deserves efficient, safe, secure, reliable air transit. The Transportation Security Administration finds itself at the center of the Federal government’s efforts to ensure secure passage of passengers and cargo. As you know, the importance of this role can hardly be understated.

The agency is at a critical point in its short history. TSA is still implementing reforms after covert testing last year revealed serious gaps in security screening. Now, long lines and record wait times at airport checkpoints are having spillover effects throughout our entire aviation system.

Passengers are understandably anxious, as they hear stories about fellow passengers who, despite their best efforts, missed flights. Asking passengers to arrive three hours before a domestic departure is unacceptable.

In addition to the stress on passengers to wear the right clothes, decide whether to check a bag, pay exorbitant baggage fees, avoid packing prohibited items and make tight connections, the stress on the flying public is felt most severely by airline and airport personnel. Unfortunately, it is the men and women who are the “face of TSA” who get blamed - the Transportation Security Officers.

Travel volume substantially increased this year, yet TSA has failed to keep pace with this growth. As a result, there is an insufficient number of Transportation Security Officers in our Nation’s airports. The current situation where we have too few screeners and far more passengers did not occur without warning. In Fiscal Year 2011, there were approximately 45,000 TSOs screening 642 million passengers. In FY 2016, TSA has about 3,000 fewer TSOs screening the roughly 740 million anticipated passengers. In its FY 2017 budget, TSA requested funding to hire an additional 323 TSOs.

To those of us who are familiar with travel volume trends, this did not seem like enough. More recently, TSA announced its plans to onboard 768 TSOs by June 15. Increasing staffing resources is certainly a good thing - but only if the proper vetting and training occur before more TSOs are added.

Administrator Neffenger, I want to know if TSA has the money necessary to achieve its mission. At Secretary Johnson’s request, Congress recently reprogrammed \$34 million in TSA accounts to pay for overtime and other costs associated with responding to the wait times crisis.

While these funds will surely aid TSA in addressing staffing shortages in the short term, moving money around is not a substitute for infusing new money into an operation. TSA should have access to all of the aviation security fees collected from the flying public to bolster security.

Yet, with the passage of the Budget Act of 2013, TSA is required to divert \$13 billion collected in security fees towards deficit reduction for ten years. This year alone, \$1.25 billion has been diverted.

Presently, I am working with Representative Peter DeFazio, the Ranking Member on the Transportation Committee, in his effort to ensure that TSA can retain the fees it collects and put it back into our aviation security system.

In the absence of more, new resources, temporary fixes may be all that TSA can offer to address a challenge that will only intensify as the U.S. experiences more economic growth and more Americans travel via commercial aviation. Congress and TSA must resist Band-Aid fixes to complicated and well-understood aviation security challenges. Patching and plugging holes are not answers.

Moreover, dismantling TSA is not the answer. Many of my colleagues on the other side of the aisle are calling for a return to the pre-9/11 privatization model.

Mr. Chairman, after the downed Egyptian Airliner, which is still under investigation, and after your observations as you recently traveled abroad, you should know that any facet of aviation security that mirrors a pre-9/11 state should be reconsidered.

Furthermore, it is nonsensical to believe that reducing TSA's role would solve immediate problems. The amount of time and resources that it takes for an airport to transition would likely cause more havoc, delays, and frustrations for passengers. As one prominent airport commissioner recently acknowledged, the benefits of privatization are "very marginal and there's a huge cost in time associated with the transition."

We need to look for long-term solutions. One solution that could be implemented at little or no additional cost would be to assign the nearly 2,500 TSOs designated as Behavior Detection Officers to checkpoint screening operations. Alarming, while the number of TSOs has declined, TSA has spent close to a billion dollars on the Screening Passengers by Observation Techniques (SPOT) Program, a behavioral detection program that GAO has repeatedly said lacks scientific validation as an effective security program.

The program is known more for racial and ethnic profiling than detecting terrorist activity. The numbers prove this. Administrator Neffenger, I have written to you asking your strong consideration of reallocating Behavior Detection Officers to perform traditional screening functions within the current TSA Staffing Model. I would like to hear from you regarding my proposal.

Finally, I would caution you, Administrator Neffenger, to not lose sight of the need to enhance TSO training so that frontline workers can better balance security effectiveness and line efficiency. I commend your actions in the wake of last year's findings regarding deficiencies in the security screening process by standing up the TSA Academy program and ordering more training for TSOs.

TSA must also focus its attention on acquiring technologies of the future. We must make the investments now to ensure that the technology at our checkpoints achieves maximum effectiveness, thereby increasing efficiency.

We all have a vested interest in getting TSA on the right track. We travel weekly, our families and constituents are members of the traveling public. While we are pressing for solutions, we must ensure that they do not come at the expense of our security."

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