

Statement of Ranking Member Bonnie Watson Coleman

Subcommittee on Transportation and Protective Security Hearing

The Public Face of TSA: Examining the Agency's Outreach and Traveler Engagement Efforts

Tuesday, February 27, 2018

Today's topic is an important one. TSA is, perhaps, the most public-facing agency of the Federal government, interacting with over two million passengers daily at more than 440 airports across the country.

TSA has a no-fail mission, as a single passenger allowed through with a weapon has the potential to cause great harm.

At the same time, a single poor interaction at the checkpoint, in which a passenger is disrespected, abused, or discriminated against, has the potential to damage TSA's reputation through negative media attention.

Doing the right thing two million times every day without a single failure requires vigilance of a well-trained and dedicated workforce.

TSA officers do a tremendous job under extremely difficult circumstances, and TSA leadership must continue to put them in a position to succeed. For the workforce to be able to do its job, TSA must develop procedures that are effective as both security and passenger facilitation standpoints.

That is why TSA's public engagement efforts are so critical. TSA has made significant progress in expanding those efforts in recent years.

TSA has convened groups that represent a wide range of passenger populations and provide TSA with feedback on its programs and policies such as the Disability and Medical Condition Coalition and the Multicultural Coalition.

Many of the groups that engage with TSA, such as the National Center for Transgender Equality, provide critical perspective that can inform training that TSA provides to its officers.

TSA has also expanded its social media presence, providing a mechanism for rapid response to passengers with questions or complaints about the screening process.

While I commend TSA for its efforts, I believe more can and must be done. Too many passengers are still left feeling frustrated and singled out by TSA's procedures.

Transgender passengers are subjected to an inordinate number of alarms from technology that is unable to screen them effectively. Individuals with certain disabilities or medical conditions experience regular delays.

And racial and religious minorities are left wondering whether their “random” selection for additional screening was truly random.

As the national organization representing transgender Americans put it in a March 2017 letter to TSA, “engagement that is limited to educating the public and addressing the personnel side of the screening experience fails to address the privacy, civil rights, and civil liberties issues inherent in current screening technology.”

My main question for TSA today is whether it can move beyond its current engagement efforts to better incorporate feedback from the public into its processes for developing new procedures and technologies.

I recognize the severity of the terrorist threat TSA faces. I also recognize the need to protect specific procedures from public disclosure, which significantly hampers TSA’s public engagement efforts.

Continuing to improve TSA screening operations to better account for passenger needs while facing an evolving threat landscape will not be easy, but the American public deserves no less.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today about the challenges they face, their ideas for the future, and how we can be helpful.