

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson*****A Review of Access Control Measures at Our Nation's Airports,
Part II***

April 30, 2015 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the Transportation Security subcommittee hearing entitled “A Review of Access Control Measures at Our Nation’s Airports, Part II”:

“This is the second Subcommittee hearing on airport access control measures. At our first hearing on this issue in February, I stated that each airport presents a unique set of security issues. While I understand the need for vendors and airline employees to access various areas of the airport to do their jobs, I also understand the need to maintain security. That is why all airline and airport workers with unescorted access to areas beyond the checkpoint must successfully complete terrorism and criminal background checks.

At many airports, these vetted workers use their Secure Identification Display Area (SIDA) badges to bypass TSA security screening to get to their workplace—which happens to be on the other side of the TSA checkpoint. In most cases, granting vetted airport personnel such access to the sterile side of the airport is beneficial to airport operations and the flying public.

However, in December 2014, we learned of an alarming instance of SIDA badge misuse. Individuals were charged with smuggling over 150 guns from Atlanta to New York City aboard commercial flights. It seems that one of the gun smugglers used his SIDA badge to bypass physical screening to pass the weapons to a co-conspirator on the sterile side of the airport. After this incident, TSA asked the Aviation Security Advisory Committee to reevaluate airport employee screening protocols. Involving the ASAC was a good decision by Acting Administrator.

The ASAC is comprised of stakeholders within the aviation community who have a deep knowledge of the inner-workings of our nation’s airports and have valuable insights to offer on how to implement security efforts in a way that does not unduly disrupt or interfere with airport operations. Last year, I was pleased that the President signed into law a measure that I authored—the “Aviation Security Stakeholder Participation Act of 2014” - to authorize this important advisory committee.

I am pleased that the ASAC acted, and in its 90-day review, set forth a number of considerations and approaches to address potential airport security vulnerabilities. The ASAC made a total of 28 recommendations. Among them was a recommendation that TSA strengthen the vetting procedures when screening employees. It also recommended that TSA maintain a database of all employees who have had credentials revoked.

For quite sometime, I have often questioned TSA about its recordkeeping of lost and revoked credentials. Together with Ranking Member Rice, I have asked the Government Accountability Office to look into this. I am looking forward to learning how TSA plans on addressing this matter. The ASAC also recommended that airports limit the number of access points into sterile areas and restrict access privileges when not needed and that airports enhance auditing practices for issued badges. I look forward to hearing Mr. Grossman’s perspective, as an airport official, on this recommendation as he testifies on the second panel today.

Furthermore, the ASAC recommended that TSA improve its insider threat program. While there is a case to be made for such enhancements, often with such programs, the devil is in the details. It is

critical that TSA's insider threat program have strong protections to ensure that the program cannot be exploited to abuse, improperly target or retaliate against airport workers.

I was pleased that DHS took timely action, in response to the ASAC recommendations. Within days, DHS Secretary Johnson took immediate actions to enhance aviation security. These actions include screening of airport employees when they travel as passengers and increasing randomization screenings of aviation employees.

Secretary Johnson also directed TSA to work towards requiring recurrent criminal history records checks for SIDA badge holders. While these are steps in the right direction, tough questions remain about the internal controls at our nation's airports and whether meaningful progress can be made to address known access control vulnerabilities.

Airport security is a shared concern, and we must work across the aisle to make sure that we strike the right balance at our nation's airports to protect the American flying public and our critical aviation infrastructure, while ensuring the free flow of commerce and people. I look forward to continued work with this Subcommittee, the ASAC, and TSA to ensure the layers of security are as strong as they should be."

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