

**Testimony of Thomas S. Warrick
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**"Twenty Years of Workforce Challenges:
The Need for H.R. 903, *The Rights for the TSA Workforce Act of 2021*"**

**Transportation & Maritime Security Subcommittee
of the House Committee on Homeland Security
May 4, 2021, 2:00 p.m.**

Madame Chair, Ranking Member Giménez, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of H.R. 903, The Rights for the TSA Workforce Act of 2021. I am currently the director of the Atlantic Council's [Future of DHS Project](#), which has been working since April 2020 to improve the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). I served from August 2007 to June 2019 at DHS, the last 10¾ years as a member of the Senior Executive Service at DHS Headquarters, under both Democratic and Republican presidents and eight Secretaries and Acting Secretaries of Homeland Security.

I'm proud to have served alongside the men and women of the Transportation Security Administration, who are some of the finest officers serving our nation. They help secure our transportation infrastructure—air travel, railroads, and pipelines that bind our country together and keep it running. They deserve your support.

Along with the other women and men of DHS, TSA's people help keep the United States secure from non-military threats, including terrorism, COVID-19, hostile nation-states like Russia, China, and Iran, and the long-term threat to lives and infrastructure from climate change and extreme weather.

We particularly need to honor the service of the people of TSA during the COVID-19 pandemic, when TSA officers have been on the front lines every day. Some have lost their lives to COVID-19. The officers of TSA deserve our deepest recognition and respect for all that they have done.

Madame Chair, there is much about DHS that is good and important, but DHS has some serious challenges that must be addressed if DHS is to succeed in its missions to protect the American people. One of these challenges is DHS's consistently low morale. Low morale diminishes the effectiveness of the workforce, lowers employee retention rates, and increases costs to hire and train new people. By failing to keep good people on the job, low morale at DHS risks the security of the American people when good people leave to take other jobs elsewhere.

Some of us remember when the U.S. military had morale problems in the 1970s. Congress, the Department of Defense, and the American people treated this as a national priority. Today, we need to treat morale at DHS with the same sense of urgency.

My testimony today is going to be a data-rich discussion, so I want to tell you where most of my data come from. Every year, the Office of Personnel Management fields the [Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey \(FEVS\)](#). This is analyzed by independent experts such as the Partnership for Public Service, which publishes their results as the [Best Places to Work in the Federal Government](#).

I should take a moment to note the Atlantic Council’s policy of intellectual independence. The Atlantic Council itself does not take positions on legislation. Views expressed are those of individual experts. I also want to credit the Atlantic Council’s partners at Accenture, whose expertise helped the Future of DHS Project understand and analyze personnel data and management trends. Of course, responsibility for the conclusions is mine, as the lead author and director of the Future of DHS Project. Let me turn to the data.

Figure 1: Results of Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) by cabinet department

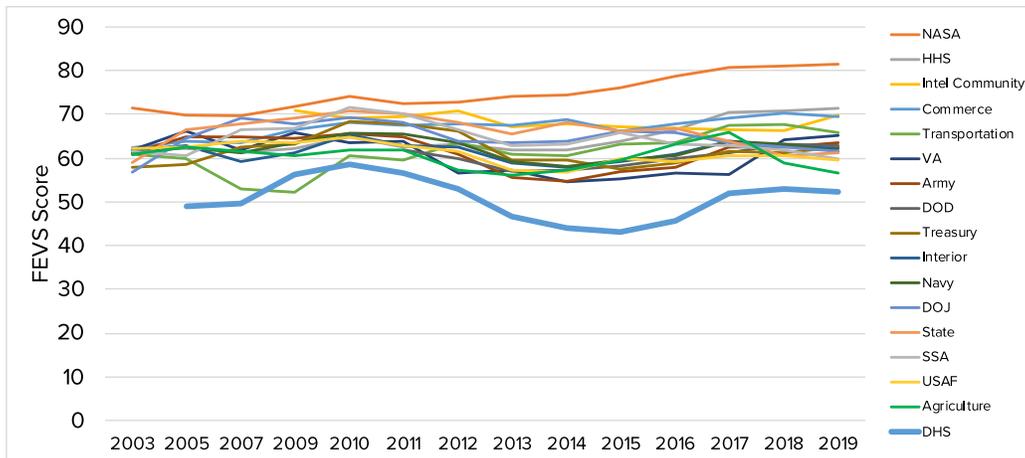
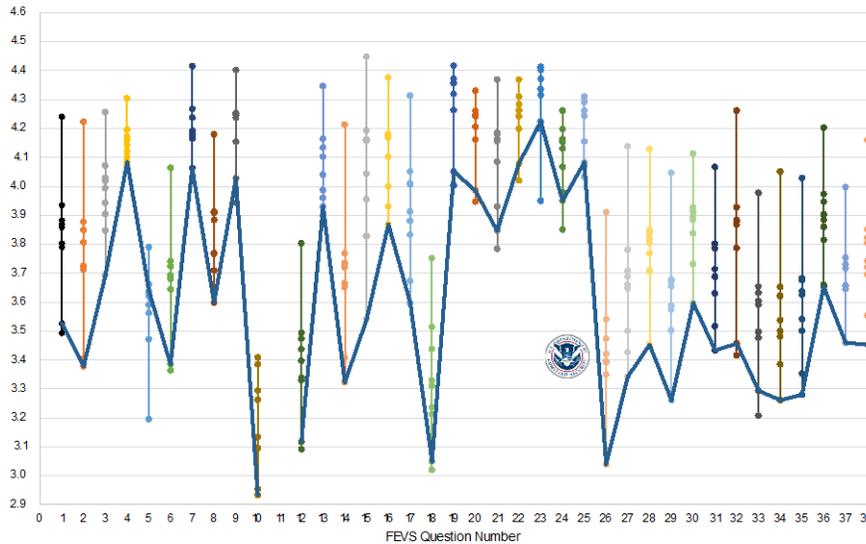


Figure 1 shows the overall morale score of DHS compared to other large cabinet departments. Since 2010, and despite improvements in some years such as 2015-2017, DHS has consistently ranked lowest among large cabinet departments.

Data for 2020 are not out yet, but some departments have released responses for 37 of 38 questions in the 2020 survey. When you calculate the average score for each department on each question, and connect the dots for DHS with a blue line, it looks like this:

**Figure 2: Partial 2020 FEVS Results from 9 Departments
Tracking DHS's Relative Position**



So in 2020, on virtually every question, DHS is once again the lowest, or among the lowest, of any federal department or agency that has released 2020 data.

DHS is not without success stories, and you should know that success in turning morale around in DHS is not only possible, it has happened many times. Let me present three examples before I turn to TSA.

**Figure 3: DHS's Office of Information & Analysis
FEVS scores by category**

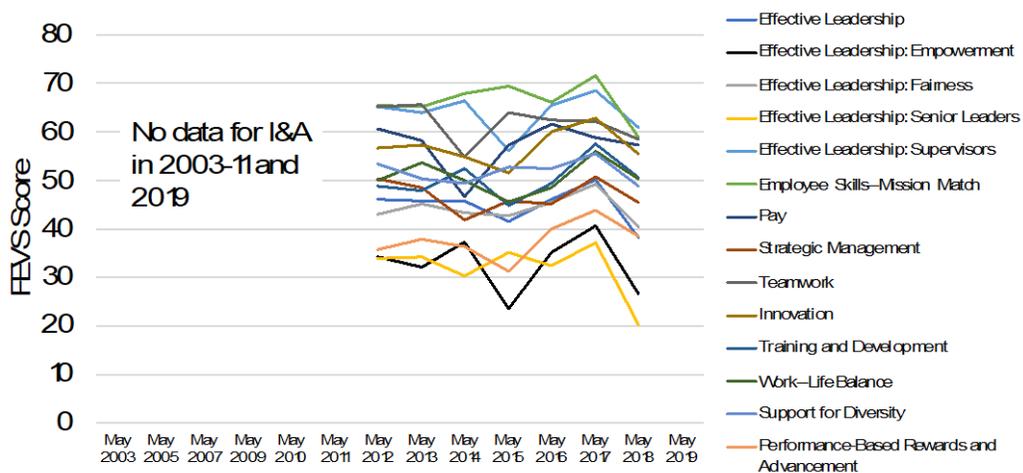


Figure 3 shows the different categories of data tracked by the analysts at the Partnership for Public Service. As you can see, most of the lines move up or down

together, which suggests that employees have an overall opinion whether their workplace is doing better or worse than in previous years. Individual scores tend to matter less compared to whether all the scores are moving up or down.

In Figure 3, we see what happened during Frank Taylor’s years as Under Secretary of Intelligence and Analysis (I&A). He initiated a major reorganization in late 2014. As often happens in the private sector, morale initially went down right after the reorganization. But by the end of his tenure, the numbers show morale was higher in 2017 than when he started—proof that he was right that his reorganization would raise morale in I&A.

Figure 4: US Secret Service FEVS scores by category

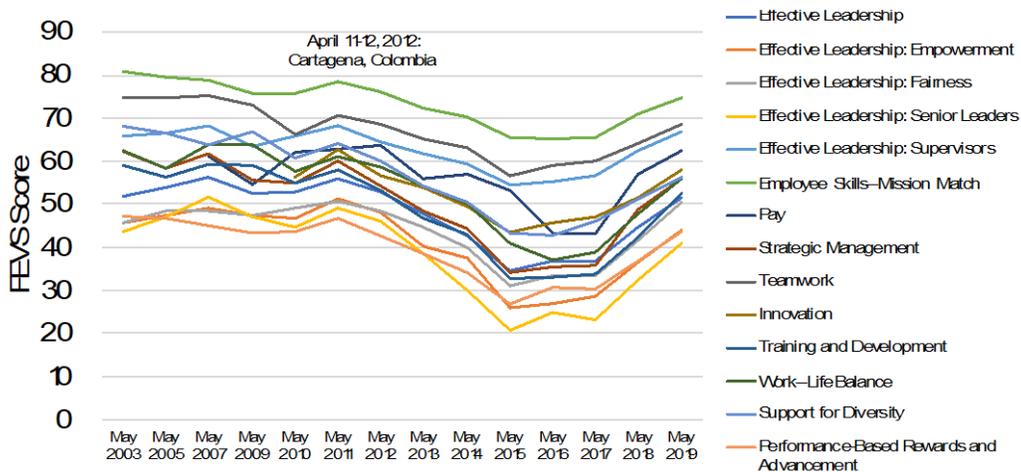
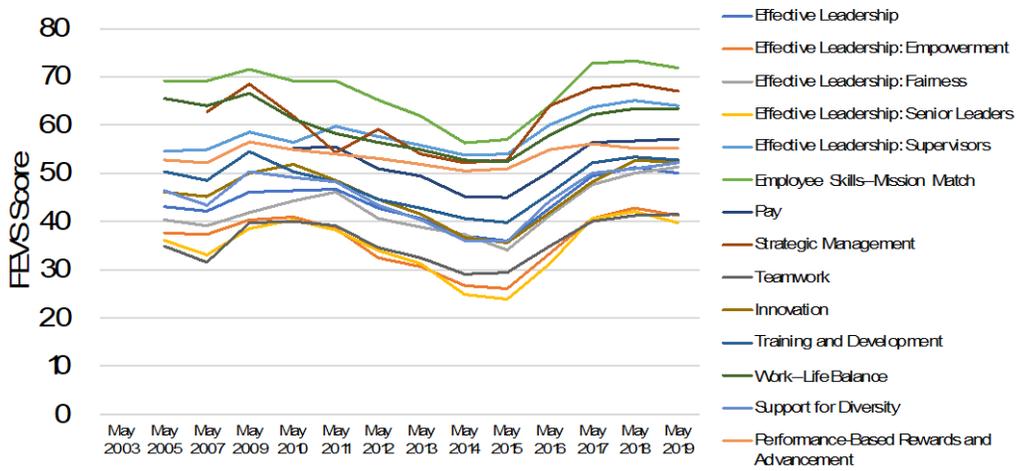


Figure 4 shows how morale in the U.S. Secret Service declined starting in 2012 after a prostitution scandal in Cartagena, Colombia and other episodes revealed problems in the Service. The decline was halted during Secretary Jeh Johnson’s tenure, then morale improved considerably because of efforts by Secretary John Kelly, both as Secretary and as Chief of Staff in the White House, and by the directorship of Randolph “Tex” Alles.

Figure 5: ICE FEVS scores by category



Finally, Figure 5 shows the dramatic improvement in morale at Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) during the directorship of Sarah Saldaña. Morale improved by 20 points in the way the Best Places to Work FEVS scores are calculated.

Now let me turn to the Transportation Security Administration. TSA’s morale overall is the lowest of the large components of DHS. **In 2019, TSA ranked 398 out of 420 subagencies across the government analyzed by the Partnership for Public Service.**

Figure 6: DHS Employees by Component, 2018

	Employees	Percent
TSA	64,051	30.76%
CBP	60,524	29.06%
FEMA	19,920	9.57%
ICE	19,912	9.56%
USCIS	18,738	9.00%
USCG	8,530	4.10%
USSS	7,292	3.50%
DHS HQ	3,397	1.63%
CISA	3,295	1.58%
FLETC	1,248	0.60%
OIG	760	0.36%
S&T	408	0.20%
DNDO	179	0.09%
Total	208,254	100.00%

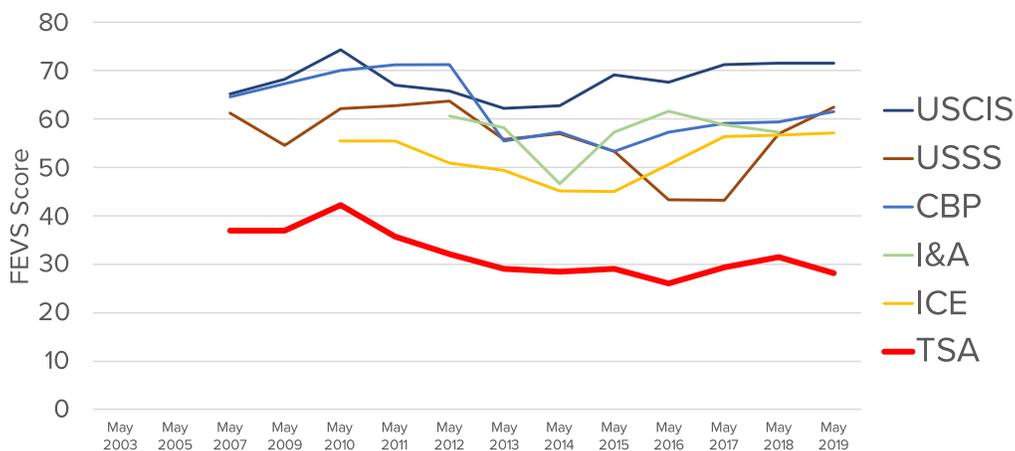
It is important to bear in mind that there are more employees at TSA than any other component of DHS. More than 30% of all DHS employees work at TSA.

One of the most important facts I would ask you to consider, Madame Chair, is that if TSA’s morale scores increased by 20 points—as they did at ICE under Sarah Saldaña from 2015 to 2017—that alone would be sufficient to lift DHS out of last place in the Best Places to Work rankings of large cabinet departments. That’s how important morale is at TSA to improving morale at DHS as a whole.

In the Atlantic Council’s [report](#) on the Future of DHS, we took a close look at what factors drive morale at TSA. We had the benefit of people who have led TSA, worked at TSA, worked with TSA, and advised TSA. And we had access to detailed data on surveys of TSA employees. The answer quite literally jumps off the page and shows why H.R. 903 can be a key to unlocking TSA’s potential to lead a turnaround in morale at DHS.

In almost every respect, TSA’s morale scores are comparable to other DHS components. There are three categories, though, where TSA stands out in a negative way. **Morale at TSA can be improved by addressing the three issues of pay, promotions and career advancement, and employee empowerment. H.R. 903 will help address all three.**

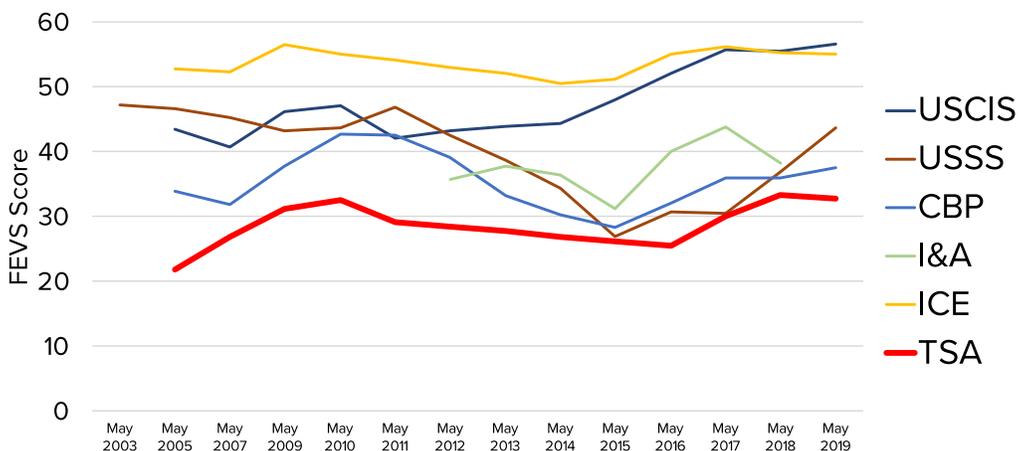
Figure 7: FEVS scores by Component: Pay



As Figure 7 shows, the most striking problem at TSA is low pay. This shows the level of employee satisfaction with pay. TSA, on this and the charts following, is shown in red.

This disparity cries out for correction. As one of our study group members who knew what he was talking about said, TSA is competing for talent against Amazon fulfillment centers—and losing. **TSA’s current pay and promotion system simply is not working.**

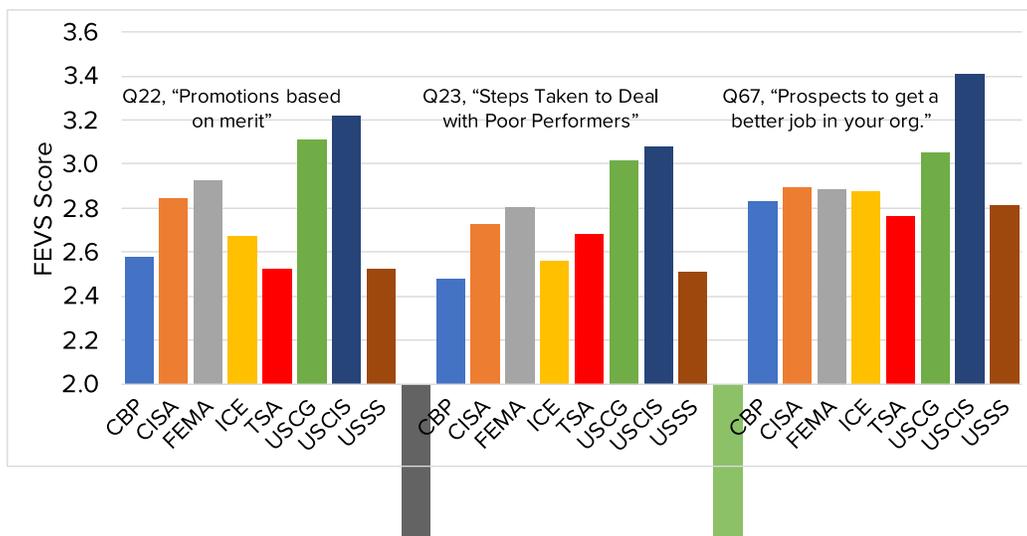
**Figure 8: FEVS scores by Component:
Performance-based rewards and advancement**



Second, as Figure 8 shows, TSA has problems in how performance is evaluated and how its officers are promoted. This is something that H.R. 903 would force TSA to address.

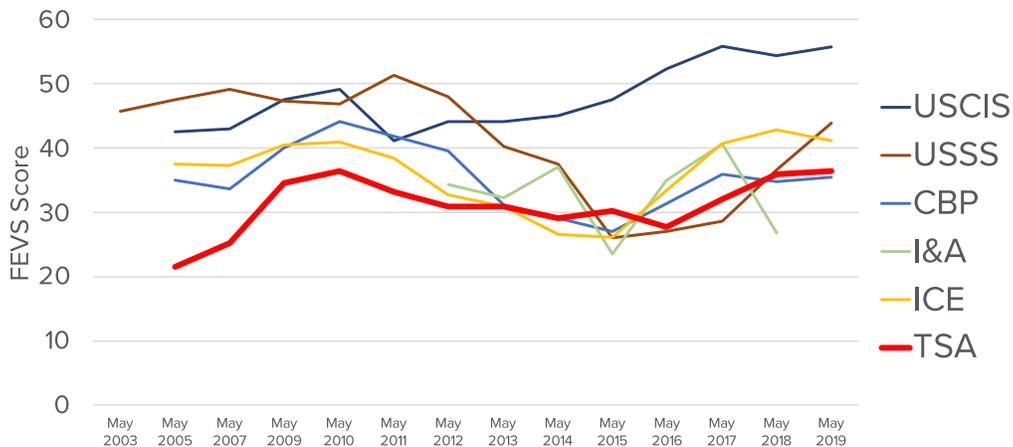
During the Future of DHS Project, we worked hard to develop a deeper understanding of the promotion and evaluation problems at TSA. Figure 9 shows the responses to three questions—Are promotions based on merit? Are steps taken to deal with poor performers? Is there a prospect of getting a better job in your organization?

**Figure 9: Response to FEVS Questions 22, 23, and 67
by DHS Component, 2017-19 3-year average**



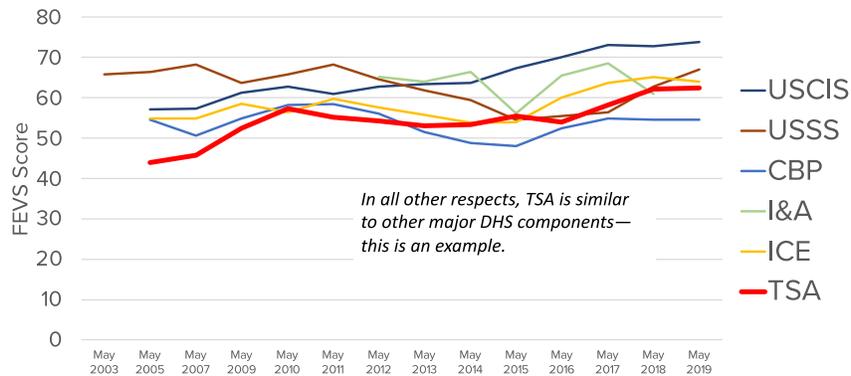
In each case, TSA is the lowest or among the lowest large DHS components. This points to the need for major reforms to how TSA evaluates and promotes its people. It also highlights that Congress and DHS need to find a way to give TSA employees a pathway to a career in homeland security, even if they decide to leave TSA for careers at places like CBP and ICE, in much the way that service in the military, through the veterans' preference, can be a gateway to a long, successful, and satisfying civil service career.

Figure 10: FEVS scores by Component: Effective Leadership: Empowerment



Another historical problem area for TSA, and unfortunately other parts of DHS, is poor employee empowerment. Figure 10 shows the extent of this. Unfortunately, in recent years, other components of DHS have fallen down to TSA's level, rather than TSA joining the ranks of components like USCIS where employee empowerment, through May 2019, has been high.

**Figure 11: FEVS scores by Component:
Effective Leadership – Supervisors**



Finally, Madame Chair, I want to dispel any doubt in the subcommittee’s minds that TSA just has low FEVS scores all around. Apart from the issues of pay, evaluations, promotions, and empowerment, TSA’s scores are comparable to other DHS components. Figure 11 shows an illustrative category, how employees rate their immediate supervisors.

What this study makes clear is that if the Congress agrees with the idea that low morale at DHS makes it harder for DHS to do its missions, then **improving TSA pay, evaluations, and promotions is an absolutely essential step that needs to be taken as soon as possible.**

Let me offer four other specific comments about H.R. 903, and two suggestions for strengthening it.

First, I’ve studied the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) scorecard on the version of H.R. 903 that was introduced in the 116th Congress. CBO scored the bill as costing \$1.77 billion over five years, most of which would go for higher pay for TSA employees. According to the CBO, employees classified at the GS-5 level would see their pay go up by \$900 a year, and employees classified at the GS-7 level would see their pay go up by about \$3,400 a year. This might not be enough to bring TSA pay into line with what it will take to attract and retain a qualified workforce. Deciding how to classify TSA officers needs to be done using a complex set of criteria, but one of those criteria should be what level of pay and responsibility will be required to develop a professional screening workforce with retention rates comparable to other federal, state, and local security and law enforcement services. The mission of securing America’s transportation networks should be able to attract and retain talented individuals who want to make their careers in homeland security.

Second, I recognize that, theoretically, there are other ways to increase TSA's pay and fix the problems with evaluations and promotions. Congress could simply appropriate more money. Congress and TSA could reform TSA's personnel practices. I have no doubt a better personnel system could be devised than what TSA now has. But those changes could have been made years ago. The fact that those changes were not made shows how hard it is force change into the system. **H.R. 903 has the virtue of being a forcing function.** If passed and signed into law, it will require everyone—Congress and the Executive—to improve a personnel system that is not working for TSA and its employees.

Third, I recognize that the Title 5 personnel rules and pay scales are not without their flaws and risks. As someone who spent 22 years in Federal service, most of that time in the civil service in two national security cabinet departments, there are certainly aspects of the Federal civil service system that should be reformed and improved. But it would be wrong to think that flaws in the civil service personnel system are a reason not to apply it to TSA. Those reforms and improvements should be made for the benefit of all civil service employees, not just TSA.

Fourth, I know there are past and possibly current officials at TSA who would worry that Congress' answer to a request by TSA to pay its employees more would be to order that cuts be made elsewhere, or that TSA would be told to "make do" with fewer officers. That risks a net loss in security for the United States and is not going to help the problem of employee morale at DHS or TSA.

Madame Chair, in closing, let me offer two suggestions for ways in which H.R. 903 could be improved.

First, you may need to extend the 180-day timeline to classify all of TSA's positions. It's vitally important to get the classification of TSA officers right if the nation is to benefit from H.R. 903. I would expect TSA would need to engage outside experts to advise in the process. I would hope TSA would come forward to the Subcommittee with a carefully thought-out timetable of how long it will take. I respect the Subcommittee's desire to hold TSA's feet to the fire by drafting this bill with an ambitious timetable. Only TSA can propose an alternative. I hope that discussion occurs soon.

Second, and most importantly, it is vital that TSA retains the ability to issue Security Directives and Emergency Amendments to protect the traveling public, without being subject to delays or negotiations, even with its own employees. My concern is that nothing should limit TSA's ability to take urgent actions under its authority to protect the traveling public and our transportation infrastructure. I know from personal experience working counterterrorism issues at DHS that **there will be times when TSA needs to take urgent action—in hours—to put in place rules and procedures to protect the safety of the public and TSA's employees.** Some of these might involve matters that in a non-security setting would be entirely appropriate

for collective bargaining. I would recommend **a short, tightly focused additional provision so that nothing in this bill would prevent the TSA administrator from taking necessary, urgent actions to protect the traveling public.**

Thank you for your attention to the important issue of morale at DHS and the Transportation Security Administration. I will be happy to answer your questions.