



HOMELAND SECURITY COMMITTEE

Statement of Subcommittee Chairman Rep. John Katko (R-NY) Transportation and Protective Security Subcommittee

"Assessing the TSA Checkpoint: The PreCheck Program and Airport Wait Times"

May 17, 2018

Remarks as Prepared

The summer months have historically seen an increase in aviation travel, and this year is no exception. Following a record-breaking 2018 spring travel season, the warmer temperatures of summer are expected to draw even bigger passenger volumes. In fact, TSA is preparing for its busiest travel season ever and expects to screen more than 243 million passengers and crew from Memorial Day through Labor Day.

We've seen this situation before in 2016 when unprecedented passenger volumes overwhelmed checkpoints across the nation. Many people missed flights due to wait times in excess of 75 minutes, although some reports contended that wait times were closer to three hours. Passengers shared photos and anecdotes online of seemingly interminable airport security lines, and the hashtag, #IHateTheWait, united disgruntled passengers across the country.

History has a way of repeating itself, and TSA currently faces pressure from Congress, the public, and aviation stakeholders to avoid past mistakes. Therefore, the purpose of this hearing is to evaluate TSA's preparedness to accommodate the demands of this year's peak summer travel.

TSA's preparedness ultimately ensures the security of the traveling public, but efficient checkpoint operations also bolster the free movement of people and goods, which brings in billions of dollars to the U.S. economy each year. Conversely, as evidenced by the 2016 wait times crisis, the checkpoint can also be the choke point that prevents the aviation sector from functioning seamlessly.

This, in itself, can prove to be an adverse security scenario, in a time when threats to crowded spaces of public areas are an increasing concern. In short, all roads lead back to the checkpoint, which is why this hearing today is so important and timely.

While a variety of factors may have negatively impacted operations at individual airports, we can point to three major errors that helped to generate a perfect storm in 2016.

First, TSA's staffing allocation model did not accurately represent the unique needs or true operating conditions of individual airports. Compounded with a pervasive Transportation Security

Officer (TSO) staffing shortage and high attrition rate, miscalculations prevented TSA from responding promptly to increases in passenger wait times.

Second, deficient communication between TSA and stakeholders resulted in missed opportunities to share flight schedules, staffing plans, and facility changes in real time.

Third, TSA significantly overestimated the amount of passengers who would receive expedited screening by way of trusted traveler programs like PreCheck or Global Entry. Specifically, TSA assumed that 50 percent of passengers would use expedited screening, but only about 27 percent of passengers used expedited screening in 2016. Last Congress, the House and Senate passed my bill, the Checkpoint Optimization and Efficiency Act, to address the gridlock at airport checkpoints throughout the United States and boost enrollment in TSA PreCheck. I look forward to discussing how this legislation has impacted enrollment figures and how TSA plans to continue expansion efforts.

While TSA has come a long way since the wait times crisis in 2016, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the similarities between the conditions today and the conditions two years ago. Passenger volume continues to grow by about 4% each year and TSO staffing has not kept pace. Despite TSA's concerted efforts to recruit and retain quality TSOs, the TSO attrition rate continues to be troubling and has a direct impact on the availability of screening lanes at airports. In turn, the limited availability of screening lanes translates to longer checkpoint wait times and an increased reliance on expedited screening measures to facilitate throughput.

Lately, despite vocal disapproval from this Subcommittee, TSA has been granting PreCheck status to passengers who have not enrolled in the program in an effort to reduce congestion at checkpoints. I have repeatedly expressed to TSA that PreCheck should not be used to manage traffic, especially under the guise of risk-based security. In the near future, I will be introducing legislation to ensure that PreCheck lanes are available only to passengers enrolled in PreCheck or another trusted traveler program. PreCheck, when used as designed, is a valuable tool that enables TSA to assess a passenger's risk to aviation security prior to their arrival at an airport checkpoint. By providing expedited screening to pre-vetted populations, TSA can direct additional TSOs to standard lanes to screen unknown travelers.

PreCheck and other trusted traveler programs, when used as designed, are undoubtedly some of the best tools in TSA's toolbox. However, despite TSA's efforts to increase enrollment, participation in the PreCheck program has stagnated after reaching nearly 6 million travelers. Undoubtedly, many passengers are frustrated by TSA's frivolous practice of merging non-enrolled travelers into PreCheck screening lanes and disappointed in the limited availability of PreCheck lanes at many airports.

The efficient operation of airport checkpoints, combined with effective management of the PreCheck program, go hand in hand when it comes to the overall security mission of TSA. That is why I am pleased to have two distinguished panels here today from both the public and private sectors, representing a diversity of perspectives, and I look forward to hearing how we can all move forward in a collaborative spirit to provide better, more efficient security to the American people.

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