

**Testimony of Rosemary A. Vassiliadis**  
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**Before the**  
**House Committee on Homeland Security**  
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Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Katko, Rep. Titus and members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to share my views regarding ways to improve passenger processing at U.S. airports. Whether it involves domestic service or international flights, restoring air travel to pre-pandemic levels and beyond is essential to the growth and well-being of America's economy.

Given my role as Director of Aviation at Harry Reid International Airport (LAS), my remarks will emphasize my experiences and familiarity with the travel industry here in Las Vegas. However, please know the points I share today generally apply to the needs and challenges at airports both large and small, spread all across the country.

I sincerely appreciate your willingness to hear my thoughts, as well as today's previous testimonies of my colleagues representing U.S. Customs and Border Protection; the Transportation Security Administration; and the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority. Our continued cooperation and partnership are critical to the success of the U.S. air travel industry and the millions of valued customers our organizations respectively serve.

Prior to the pandemic, nonstop international air service was a wonderful success story for Las Vegas. The number of passengers who came to Las Vegas via foreign-flag air carriers increased each year from 2011 through 2019, topping out at nearly 3.8 million annual passengers in both 2018 and 2019. These were remarkable numbers for a point-to-point destination market such as Las Vegas, which differs greatly from traditional U.S. gateway hub airports such as those in Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles or New York.

Over the course of 2019, LAS enjoyed nonstop service to and from 12 different countries spread over four continents. Then came COVID-19, and all of that disappeared almost overnight.

Thankfully, our international traffic has begun its recovery. Today at LAS, we enjoy

direct nonstop service from Canada, Mexico, Panama, the Netherlands, Great Britain, Germany and Switzerland. We'll welcome back South Korean service in a few weeks, and hope to add more international markets later this year.

This April, international air passengers at LAS totaled nearly 191,000 – a significant jump from the 31,000 air passengers reported in the same month a year ago. With most of our pre-pandemic markets back online, we have high hopes for the coming summer travel season, and our success will require active leadership from the Department of Homeland Security – especially U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) – to ensure our international guests do not experience significant delays due to staffing shortages.

First, I want to congratulate the Administration for adopting COVID-19 health and safety protocols that enabled the wide return of international passengers beginning last fall. These current targeted, risk-based approaches are a much more effective strategy than the one-size-fits-all tactics under the prior Presidential Proclamation banning nearly all non-essential travel between the United States and specific countries. The need to be vigilant remains; we cannot permit a reemergence of the virus to again decimate travel to Nevada, nor any other states. LAS has invested millions in improvements to the airport to prepare for the safe return of travelers. Notwithstanding the significant increase in the costs for airfare, passenger levels at LAS are finally recovering to their pre-pandemic levels. We need a full complement of CBP and TSA staffing onsite at LAS for Las Vegas to both recover and further grow its core economic base.

To this end, I would like to propose a few specific suggestions to boost the industry.

### **Support Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Staffing, Technology Deployment, and Trusted Traveler Programs as Passenger Traffic Returns to International Airports**

- ***Provide funding to increase CBP staffing levels at U.S. airports to meet current and future needs.*** We urge the Congress to provide funding for new CBP officers so the agency is prepared to handle an influx of new international passengers, and support those air service opportunities finally returning our airports. CBP's latest workload staffing model, which used data from the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, still reveals a shortage of nearly 1,000 officers across the system. Since the model was most recently run, the pandemic has subsided and international trade and travel volumes are expected to

surpass pre-pandemic levels in many locations. Current staffing levels already fail to address the growing demand of travel and trade at our airports-of-entry, and we anticipate the workload staffing model will indicate drastically higher CBP staffing shortages in subsequent runs.

Providing additional CBP officers during this time of growth among international passengers and cargo will reduce lengthy wait times, and facilitate new economic opportunities in communities throughout the United States. On top of that, CBP is preparing a large redeployment of officers from air and sea ports to the southern border, which will further exacerbate staffing and workload shortfalls at airports. Increasing the overall number of CBP officers will allow the agency greater flexibility to maintain its operational capacity at all ports-of-entry.

LAS is not a 24-hour port. We therefore need CBP to work with us as we seek schedules for returning and new service that fit into our port's available hours. We have already experienced international carriers which sought to schedule select LAS arrivals outside of our port's current operating hours, all in order to maximize connecting opportunities to fill more seats on U.S.-bound flights. As LAS looks to new potential markets in Asia and the South Pacific, existing flight patterns into other western U.S. destinations likewise suggest we'll receive more requests for flights to arrive outside of today's port hours.

During a recovery period in which we cannot afford to turn away visitors, flexibility in staffing availability within the ports is critical to both our near-term growth, and future expansions of air service into LAS.

Lastly, we anticipate when the United States eliminates pre-departure COVID-19 testing requirement for arriving foreign travelers, international traffic will jump instantly. Airlines for America this month shared a survey of its carriers that estimated dropping existing testing rules would bring in an additional 4.3 million international passengers and \$1.7 billion in incremental revenue – and could result in an incremental 1.075 million foreign visitors and \$2.1 billion in visitor spending.

In addition, with the agency's precipitous drop in collected user fees during the COVID-19 pandemic, airports greatly appreciate Congress providing supplemental resources to help

CBP maintain its staffing levels and also continue to onboard new officers during this difficult period.

- ***Provide sufficient funding to advance biometric-exit solutions at airports.*** CBP has begun biometric-exit pilots at select U.S. airports, and I am proud to report LAS is leading the way. But numerous infrastructure, process, staffing, and funding challenges must still be overcome before a full-scale biometric exit program can be implemented nationwide.

Today's airports simply were not designed to accommodate the space, technology and connectivity needs of a fully biometric exit program, and CBP's workforce staffing model does not account for the number of officers needed to implement fully biometric exit program at airports. Airports support dedicated CBP funding for biometric implementation that accounts for the actual, upfront infrastructure and staffing investments, as well as for the ongoing maintenance and staffing support CBP needs to administer these programs with minimal disruptions to the traveling public.

- ***Provide dedicated funding for CBP to expand and promote Global Entry and NEXUS and related technology to improve passenger facilitation and security.*** Airports support the Global Entry and NEXUS international trusted traveler programs to expedite the processing of passengers departing from Canadian preclearance airports or arriving at airports in the United States.

These programs are crucial for speeding facilitation, enhancing security, and helping to mitigate the shortage of CBP officers. Expanding the availability of trusted traveler programs to capture more travelers would allow CBP to focus more on passengers who have not been previously vetted, thus enhancing security and processing efficiency. Airports will continue to work with CBP to identify passenger processing technology efficiencies, and to promote the expansion of its international trusted traveler programs.

### **Support the Transportation Security Administration's (TSA) Responsibility to Provide Security Screening, Assist Local Law Enforcement, and Deploy New Technology**

- ***Provide funding for the number of Transportation Security Officers (TSOs) and screening technology necessary to screen passengers and baggage effectively and efficiently.*** With passenger volumes next year expected to surpass those of 2019, TSA needs adequate resources to ensure screening checkpoint and baggage operations keep pace with growing passenger volumes and security demands. TSA's resource allocation plan demonstrates that thousands of additional TSOs are necessary to provide adequate staffing at security checkpoints and baggage screening locations. These officers would help mitigate vulnerabilities associated with large groups of passengers waiting in lengthy queues at TSA passenger screening checkpoints, as well as the potential for misconnecting checked baggage and passengers to miss their intended flights.

Additionally, deploying adequate technology to screening checkpoints would help TSA increase security efficiency and effectiveness. TSA also should accelerate the ongoing testing, enhancement, and procurement of new technology that will increase security, produce significant budget savings, and enhance traveler convenience. Congress could accelerate the testing and deployment of new technology at security checkpoints such as:

- Enhanced Advanced Imaging Technology (AIT)
- Credential Authentication Technology with a camera (CAT-2)
- Computed Tomography (CT) integrated with Automated Screening Lanes (ASLs)
- Explosive Detection Systems (EDS).

In accordance with an Aviation Security Advisory Committee recommendation, establish an airport security-focused grant program at TSA to support the deployment of perimeter control, access control, checkpoint screening systems, automated screening lanes, and other security technology at airports.

- ***End the diversion of TSA user fees to subsidize other federal programs, as called for in the administration's budget request.*** Congress established the 9/11 Passenger Security Fee to fund civil aviation security services, including the salary, benefits and overtime of Transportation Security Officers, as well as the acquisition, operation, and maintenance of screening equipment. However, over a 14-year period ending in 2027, a total of more than

\$18.1 billion in collected TSA user fees will be siphoned off to offset the national debt. In the near term, this diversion will cost the TSA \$1.5 billion in foregone revenue in each of fiscal years 2022 and 2023 alone – funds that TSA could otherwise be using to hire more Transportation Security Officers, invest in emerging checkpoint screening systems that detect more complex threat items while increasing efficiency, upgrade current systems more quickly as new capabilities arise, and replace outdated baggage screening systems.

With wait times increasing at TSA security checkpoints, the entire 9/11 Passenger Security Fee should be used to adequately fund TSA technology procurement and for the TSO staffing levels necessary to screen passengers and their baggage effectively and efficiently.

- ***Ensure TSA has the funding necessary to purchase new explosive detection systems (EDS) to replace outdated systems, and to continue to fulfill its obligation to reimburse eligible airports for having installed EDS.*** As many EDS have or are rapidly reaching the end of their useful lives, TSA needs funding to purchase replacement systems. Thankfully, LAS has already received federal money to begin these replacements, for which I am grateful.

Absent necessary funding to widen this effort, TSA will incur increasing costs to operate and maintain old systems that routinely break and adversely impact security and airport operations. We appreciate the Congress providing funding in the past three fiscal years for TSA to reimburse airports for previously incurred costs associated with the construction and deployment of in-line checked baggage screening systems. Since these airports diverted significant amounts of money from other important aviation security projects in order to purchase and install EDS, we encourage Congress to continue to provide additional funding so TSA can follow through on its commitment to reimburse airports.

We recommend including a prohibition that prevents TSA from redirecting any unused EDS funds to other TSA programs until all eligible airports receive full reimbursement.

- ***Ensure TSA continues to staff airport exit lanes, rejecting the administration's attempts to eliminate the program and shift the full burden to airports.*** We appreciate Congress's continued effort to ensure that TSA abides by the provision in the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2013, which specifically directs the agency to monitor those exit lanes where it performed

the function on December 1, 2013. Airports remain concerned about potential security issues and the significant costs associated with TSA instituting an unfunded mandate for airport operators to provide staff to monitor these exit lanes.

In addition, we support TSA installing appropriate exit-lane monitoring technology where feasible and appropriate.

- ***Ensure TSA has the funds necessary to fulfill its obligation to reimburse airports under the Law Enforcement Officer (LEO) Reimbursement Program instead of shifting the full burden to airports.*** We appreciate Congress's continued effort to preserve the LEO Reimbursement Program. TSA created this program to partially reimburse airports for providing law enforcement officer staffing at screening checkpoints because the agency did not have the funding to do so, as required in federal law. Over time, many airports have entered into reimbursable agreements with TSA to provide law enforcement officers to support TSA screening operations. As security threats in the public areas of airports continue to evolve – and TSA imposes additional requirements on airport law enforcement officers – it is essential for Congress to provide TSA adequate funding to fully support the LEO Reimbursement Program.

Thank you.