

Testimony of Kerry Philipovitch
House Homeland Security Committee's Subcommittee on Transportation Security
May 26, 2016

Good morning Chairman Katko, Ranking Member Rice, and members of the Subcommittee. My name is Kerry Philipovitch, Senior Vice President of Customer Experience at American Airlines, testifying on behalf of Airlines for America. Thank you for inviting me here today to discuss the impact TSA security lines is having on our customers.

The Subcommittee's focus on this issue is both timely and beneficial since we are just two days shy of the Memorial Day weekend and the start of the busy summer travel season. Regardless of timing, there is nothing more important to the airline industry than the safety and security of our passengers, employees, and cargo.

We have never seen TSA wait times that affect airlines and passengers throughout the United States like we've seen in recent months. Without immediate leadership and innovation, the 220 million Americans that will board a plane this summer will be frustrated and angry passengers. We are working collaboratively with the TSA to develop and implement short, medium, and long-term solutions to the pressing problem of excessive wait times, but more needs to be done, and fast.

The Root of the Problem

Up until last year, TSA frontline employees kept our skies safe while efficiently moving passengers through the screening process. Programs that had been in place to drive efficiency and increase security throughput were then eliminated without adding commensurate resources required to support longer passenger processing times. The result is a screening process that is causing unacceptably long security lines and a frustrated flying public.

Our discussions with the TSA have revealed three other contributing factors. First, it appears TSA did not adjust its staffing model after screening protocols were changed. Second, TSA is experiencing abnormally high attrition and is unable to retain Transportation Security Officers, or TSOs. Third, the TSA PreCheck program, which allows low-risk passengers to go through an expedited screening process, has not met enrollment goals.

All of these factors combined caused a systemic slowdown in passenger processing at security checkpoints, resulting in delays and missed flights. Year-to-date, more than 70,000 American Airlines customers have missed flights due to excessive wait times.

The same challenges at passenger checkpoints bog down screening of checked baggage, which is also a core TSA function. This year alone, over 40,000 checked bags were delayed in TSA screening and did not travel on their scheduled flight, causing further inconvenience to our customers.

To say customers are agitated is putting it mildly, and the public outcry has resonated. Congress recently reallocated \$34 million in funding to TSA to hire more TSOs by June 15. We are also glad to see that TSA is working to shift canine teams to airports experiencing the worst delays, rebalancing staffing and hiring more TSOs.

However, TSA needs to do more, and more collaboration is needed to minimize the impact on summer travelers, airports, airline employees, and the overall economy.

Airlines Are Doing Our Part to Support TSA

Airlines are pitching in to do our part. We are committing millions of dollars to fund non-security functions – like bin running and queue management – so TSOs can focus solely on the screening aspects of their jobs. At American, this summer we are adding an additional \$4 million on top of our \$17 million of planned spend this year to facilitate passengers through TSA checkpoints at our largest airports.

Airlines have advised customers to arrive at the airport two hours in advance of a domestic flight and three hours prior to an International departure to ensure sufficient time to clear security. This added time in the travel process is inconvenient, and will likely affect less frequent travelers who are not familiar with the screening process. The added hassle also has the potential to significantly dampen demand for air travel.

We are launching aggressive campaigns to promote TSA PreCheck to our customers and employees. As PreCheck enrollment increases, however, TSA must commit to keep PreCheck lanes open and sufficiently staffed, reliably throughout the day, especially during peak travel times.

When canine teams are deployed, TSA can increase passengers going through TSA PreCheck. The industry is also exploring ways to facilitate support for additional canine teams, including whether TSA can use certified canines from other governmental agencies to conduct passenger screening.

We, as an industry, are doing our part to help TSA manage through this challenge.

Airlines Are Willing to Work with TSA to Solve the Security Screening Issue

However, airline actions alone cannot solve the problem. We need a partner in TSA that will consider innovative ideas to mitigate wait times immediately and in the long run.

In the short-term, to augment resources, TSA could declare an “all hands on deck” for the summer much like we do at airports during peak and irregular operations. All available staff – whether full-time, part-time, administrative, or based at headquarters – should be assigned to help at passenger screening checkpoints. TSA resources should be prioritized based on airports with the most need and projected traffic volumes.

TSA could look at ways to spur enrollment in TSA PreCheck by streamlining the enrollment process, and potentially reducing the fee to enroll. To ensure that enrollment resources don't become a new bottleneck, TSA should expedite its selection of third party enrollment providers.

We also encourage TSA to give Federal Security Directors the ability to coordinate and cooperate with their airline partners to make local decisions about manpower resource allocation without having to consult TSA headquarters.

TSA, airports and airlines need to work collaboratively to manage through the summer. Full transparency to staffing models and performance data is required to engage all stakeholders in troubleshooting issues. We can't be a part of the solution if we don't have all the facts.

To that point, we applaud TSA for its decision, this week, to stand up a national command center and institute a daily stakeholder call to better prepare for each day's challenges.

In the long-run, TSA could review current security protocols to ensure there is no duplication or unnecessary procedures. As a part of this review, TSA should consider additional methods for increasing risk based screening, some of which were discontinued last year.

Airlines and airports are eager to work with TSA to expedite next generation screening technology, such as that found in Innovation Lanes.

Finally, TSA must create a position that reports to the Administrator to advocate for customers within TSA, just as airlines and many airports have executives dedicated to improving customer experience.

These are just a few ideas that American Airlines and A4A believe can help reduce the severe congestion in airport security screening. Of course, Congress can help by ensuring Administrator Neffenger and his team have the tools and resources needed to improve screening, including ensuring that the passenger security fee collected for TSA goes to TSA

A Short-Term Moratorium on Baggage Fees Will Not Help or Fix the Broken System

We challenge all stakeholders to offer constructive ideas that will bring relief. Yet, one idea we have heard is for airlines to waive checked baggage fees this summer. The rationale is that the number of bags screened at passenger checkpoints would decrease so appreciably that the TSA wait times would return to normal. The premise of the idea is flat out wrong, and distracts from the root problems of the TSA crisis.

The fact is that bag fees have been in place since 2008, but travelers have never been impacted by TSA wait times like we've recently seen.

Over the last few months, all passengers have experienced long TSA lines, even those flying on carriers that do not charge bag fees. Chicago Midway, for example, is served predominantly by one of our competitors that does not charge checked baggage fees, yet airport security wait times have still been in excess of 90 minutes. There is simply no correlation.

Waiving checked baggage fees would not have any material impact on wait times. Indeed, TSA's own data shows the number of checked bags per person has remained relatively unchanged for the past five years.

What we do believe, however, is that eliminating bag fees certainly would increase the number and size of checked bags. Additional checked bags would further inundate TSA baggage screening, which already lacks the resources to timely and consistently screen checked bags.

Phoenix and Miami, two of American's hubs, have suffered from baggage delays in recent months. Both airports have sustained tens of thousands of misconnected checked bags solely due to TSA issues.

This idea isn't helpful, it's harmful. It wouldn't help the core problem of wait times but it would make the checked baggage problem worse. And, at a time all airlines are trying to help TSA through their crisis, it is diverting attention from that effort.

Working Toward a Solution

Ultimately, the TSA screening issue was not created overnight, and will not be solved overnight. However, we must work together to offer ideas and resources to TSA while Administrator Neffenger and his team review current screening protocols, funding priorities, and management practices.

The industry continues to work cooperatively with TSA, airports and other stakeholders to better serve our valued customers.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.