

Statement of Wendy Reiter
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Before the House Homeland Security Subcommittee on Transportation and Protective Security
“Assessing the TSA Checkpoint: The PreCheck Program and Airport Wait Times”
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Chairman Katko, Ranking Member Watson Coleman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss operations at Transportation Security Administration (TSA) checkpoints, the PreCheck program and airport wait times. My name is Wendy Reiter, and I currently serve as the Director of Aviation Security for Seattle-Tacoma International Airport (Sea-Tac), which is owned and operated by the Port of Seattle. I also recently served as Vice-Chair of the Transportation Security Services Committee of the American Association of Airport Executives (AAAE).

To put my remarks in context, let me start by sharing the growth that Sea-Tac has been experiencing, and the impact that has had on our airport’s TSA security screening checkpoints. In 2010, Sea-Tac served 31 million passengers; last year – a mere seven years later – we saw almost 47 million passengers. This growth is a reflection of the increasing economic dynamism and global relevance of the Puget Sound region and Washington state. With innovative companies such as Boeing, Microsoft, Amazon and Starbucks along with disruptive start-ups in biotech, global health, retail, manufacturing and IT, our economy is booming, and the Seattle area has one of the fastest growing populations in the country. Those individuals and businesses demand more air service.

It is not just the robust Seattle economy that requires Sea-Tac Airport to scramble to handle this extraordinary increase in airline traffic; Sea-Tac is playing an increasingly important role in the National Airspace System (NAS). Over the last seven years, almost a dozen new international carriers have introduced service to our airport, while our hub carriers have expanded flights, destinations and plane sizes. As aircraft technology has evolved and as foreign flag airlines have initiated non-stop service from cities across Asia to U.S. cities, Seattle’s role as a critical U.S. gateway to Asia has become more pronounced. This circumstance has certainly benefited the Seattle region, but, more importantly, it has made the NAS more efficient by effectively replacing a Northeast Asia hub with a U.S. gateway hub. Quite logically, there is a growing amount of “feed” traffic from all over the United States to Seattle to make the most efficient use of a gateway that is closer than any other in the US to the vast majority of Asian destinations.

The point is that Sea-Tac is serving more and more passengers, and we are working overtime to try and accommodate that demand. On our side, that requires major investments in infrastructure, technology and staffing, and we are currently in the midst of a \$3 billion capital investment plan, with another \$5 billion plan in the works. We’ve also invested tens of millions of dollars in additional staffing and on exit lane and screening lane technologies to do our part to reduce the burden on TSA and increase the efficiency of their checkpoints.

But regardless of what we do, TSA is being required to quickly increase their resources and capacity to handle our growth. We deeply appreciate the partnership we have with them to try and accommodate this demand, including both our local TSA staff and TSA leadership in Washington, DC. I also want to thank Chairman Katko and the Subcommittee for your work a few years ago on the Checkpoint Optimization and Efficiency Act, which was passed into law as part of the FAA Extension Safety and Security Act of 2016. I was honored to be part of a roundtable discussion this Subcommittee hosted prior to drafting that legislation and I am glad Congress agreed with so many of the recommendations of

how to address what was then a crisis at the checkpoints. The result has been increased Federal Security Director (FSD) discretion and improved collaboration, communications and information sharing at the local level. However, there is more work that still needs to be done.

At Sea-Tac, we have set a goal of getting all travelers through the passenger screening checkpoints in 20 minutes or less. We see this effort not only as a customer service priority but also a security measure, because the best way to protect an aggregation of people from perimeter threats is to disperse them to the sterile side of our airport as quickly as possible.

Unfortunately, meeting that 20 minute goal has been difficult, in large part because TSA hiring cannot keep pace with the attrition of Transportation Security Officers (TSOs) to the better, higher paying jobs that our region's economy is creating. Although TSA has implemented faster hiring procedures, increased outreach, recruitment and retention bonuses and local training, TSO attrition rates translate directly into fewer operational screening lanes and longer checkpoint wait times; to give you a sense of our challenges, we are only averaging around 65% of customers making it through the checkpoints under our 20 minute goal. Those wait times have been consistently increasing since the fall of 2017.

Because of those TSA staffing challenges, we rely greatly on TSA's use of passenger screening canines for what the agency refers to as Canine Enhanced Screening. These dogs have been able to almost double the throughput of our checkpoints, when deployed, and are an unmatched resource in helping us achieve our customer service and security goals. In fact, we believe that TSA canines are the best possible investment that the TSA can make; they provide the biggest efficiency gains, their accuracy is even better than screening machines, and they assess current threats rather than PreCheck's vetting of background risks.

Like most large and fast growing airports throughout the country, we consistently encounter issues with the availability of canines; being staffed to our allotted number of canines; transfer of canines to other airports; or time spent in training and certification. It took almost a year and a half between when the TSA model assigned us ten passenger screening canines to when we reached that level this past March, and we're still in a situation where some of those ten dogs are only temporary transfer canines. This subcommittee knows all too well the challenges at Lackland Air Force Base with increasing national canine capacity, and Sea-Tac has been a staunch advocate – in partnership with US Senator Maria Cantwell – for exploring third party canine training and certification options. I would like to thank the Subcommittee for their efforts on this topic, and please consider us a partner as you work to move forward.

Given the challenges that we already have with TSO and canine availability, we have significant concerns about plans under consideration that would reduce the ability of TSA to offer modified screening for general lane passengers screened by canines. We can ill afford any changes to procedures that would decrease throughput and increase security risks to our airport.

We appreciate the importance of increasing enrollment in the TSA PreCheck program, and the benefit to airport security that comes from those vetted passengers. But the program is not yet living up to its full potential; enrollment numbers have consistently been below projected volumes, and enrollment options are severely limited. We believe strongly that TSA needs to first follow the direction mandated by Congress in the FAA Extension, Safety and Security Act of 2016 to increase the public's enrollment access to the program; to deploy TSA-approved ready-to-market private sector solutions; to partner with the private sector to use kiosks, mobile devices or other mobile enrollment platforms to make

enrollment easier; and to consider leveraging existing resources and abilities at airports to conduct fingerprint and background checks. Only then, once certain enrollment benchmarks are met, should TSA implement plans to scale back the use of canine enhanced screening.

Taking these steps in the reverse order is a recipe for disaster – reducing both customer service and security. TSA PreCheck is an important threat reduction program, but we believe strongly that the bigger threat to airport and passenger security is long wait times that create soft targets for those that seek to inflict harm and terror on our facilities. Reducing the throughput benefits of canines would increase wait times at general screening lanes exponentially, erasing any security gains from incentivizing PreCheck enrollment.

The timing of such changes should also take into consideration the massive deployment of Computed Tomography (CT) machines in the next few years. We support the added security that this advanced technology will provide but understand the significant work that will need to be done to address some of the challenges that its implementation will bring – such as throughput rates, false alarm resolutions and physical checkpoint configurations. TSA has not yet substantially engaged airport operators in sharing the plans for deploying the CT equipment, and our own experience working with TSA on ASL implementation has shown us the significant amount of time and resources necessary to see the full efficiency impacts of a new technology.

While responsibility for passenger screening is, by law, the sole responsibility of TSA, airports play a critical role in partnering with the agency to help it meet its core mission. Airports perform a number of inherently local security-related functions at their facilities, including incident response and management, perimeter security, employee credentialing, access control, infrastructure and operations planning, and numerous local law enforcement and public safety functions. To that end, we hope that any changes that would impact security would be done in collaboration with us, rather than being imposed.

The Port of Seattle looks forward to continuing to partner with TSA to ensure effective, efficient and innovative security operations for the screening of passengers. Thank you for your time today, and I look forward to your questions.