

“Identifying, Resolving, and Preventing Vulnerabilities in TSA’s Security Operations”
House Committee on Oversight and Reform
10:00 AM, Tuesday, June 25, 2019
2154 Rayburn House Office Building
Rep. Gerald E. Connolly (D-VA)

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding today’s hearing to examine security vulnerabilities at the Transportation Security Administration (TSA). In the past several years, this Congress has examined shortcomings at TSA from mismanagement and misconduct to retaliation against whistleblowers. I appreciate your efforts during this Congress and previous Congresses to ensure the safety of all Americans while traveling. TSA is the first line of defense in protecting our nation’s transportation hubs. It is imperative that TSA identify and address in a timely manner safety concerns raised by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Office of Inspector General (OIG). However, several recommendations for TSA dating back to at least 2015 from both GAO and the DHS OIG remain unresolved.

Americans rely on TSA to keep them safe when they travel through commercial airports. Many Americans are familiar with the routine procedures of airport security—removing large electronic devices and liquids from our carry-ons and taking off our shoes to be screened. What many Americans do not know, though, is that TSA routinely conducts covert testing to identify vulnerabilities and security threats in this standard security process. Undercover personnel attempt to pass weapons and other forbidden items through security points at airports or through checked baggage screening equipment. When security controls fail, TSA is supposed to address the exposed vulnerabilities that allowed dangerous items to pass security checkpoints. According to GAO and the DHS OIG, however, TSA has continually failed to secure these vulnerabilities. TSA’s mission is difficult – it serves roughly 440 airports where TSA agents screen nearly 2 million passengers, 5.5 million carry-on items, and 1.4 million checked bags daily – but security vulnerabilities discovered through covert testing put passengers at risk and cannot be ignored. According to the DHS OIG, three main factors contribute to these vulnerabilities: people; TSA processes and procedures; and, technological limitations.

The DHS OIG and GAO also found that TSA has not fully developed or implemented risk-based strategies, which would allow TSA to enhance the design, analysis, and application of covert tests, and ensure resources are allocated effectively. Specifically, in April 2019, GAO released its report, “TSA Improved Covert Testing but Needs to Conduct More Risk-Informed Tests and Address Vulnerabilities.” This report resulted in nine recommendations to TSA regarding covert testing and implementing risk-informed approaches for covert testing. Importantly, GAO recommended that TSA “establish timeframes and milestones for key steps in its Security Vulnerability Management Process.” When TSA identifies a security vulnerability, there must be a timeline for mitigating it. Without a timeline or goal-setting, security vulnerabilities and corresponding recommendations languish, putting the flying public at risk.

For this reason, I am proud to co-sponsor the Chairman’s bill, the Covert Testing and Risk Mitigation Improvement Act of 2019. This bill will codify procedures recommended by GAO in its April 2019 report, including establishing standards for covert testing and tracking and reporting progress on resolving security vulnerabilities. For years, TSA has continuously failed to address safety concerns. With this bill, Congress will be able to hold TSA accountable.

The Trump Administration is currently diverting scarce TSA resources to the southern border to deal with a humanitarian crisis it has helped create. TSA expects a four percent increase in passenger volume this summer, and a senior TSA official warned that by sending employees to the border, TSA is “accepting some risk as we enter a very busy summer.” In addition to sending employees to the border, the Trump Administration reportedly plans to divert \$232 million from TSA funds to border operations. Congress did not provide TSA an excess \$232 million dollars. Each dollar is critical to the agency and to our country’s national security. By TSA’s own admission, diverting funding and resources puts the public at greater risk.

I urge TSA to close longstanding recommendations from GAO and the DHS OIG. Last year, President Trump took credit for 2017 being the safest year ever in global commercial aviation, yet he is actively undermining airport safety. Our nation’s airports are at risk because of continuing security vulnerabilities and this Administration’s politically motivated diversion of TSA resources. I thank the Chairman for his unrelenting work ensuring TSA keeps us all safe and holding this Administration accountable for its use of taxpayer dollars.