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**Before the Committee on Oversight  
and Reform**

**U.S. House of Representatives**

**“Identifying, Resolving, and  
Preventing Vulnerabilities in TSA’s  
Security Operations”**



Good morning Chairman Cummings, Ranking Member Jordan, and members of the Committee.

Thank you for inviting me here today to discuss our reviews of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), TSA's efforts to identify, resolve, and prevent vulnerabilities in its security operations, and persistent challenges. TSA has a vital, but extremely difficult mission to protect the Nation's transportation systems and ensure freedom of movement for people and commerce. Securing the Nation's aviation transportation system remains a formidable task. Every day, TSA employees at about 450 U.S. airports screen approximately 2 million passengers, 5.5 million carry-on items, and 1.4 million checked bags. This responsibility is complicated by the constantly evolving threat of adversaries willing to use any means to cause harm and destruction. Missing even a single threat can have potentially catastrophic consequences.

To detect and defend against attempted terrorist attacks on the air transportation system, TSA relies on 20 layers of security. In airport "secure areas," these layers include Transportation Security Officer (TSO) screening of passengers and carry-on baggage at passenger checkpoints, screening of checked baggage, and using canines. The Federal Air Marshal Service (FAMS) provides another level of security on aircraft. Each layer plays a role in deterring, preventing, or detecting a terrorist attack.

In 2015, then-Inspector General Roth testified before Congress seven times expressing concern about the vulnerabilities in TSA operations, while also acknowledging TSA's challenges and areas of improvement. For example, in his testimonies, Mr. Roth pointed out challenges in TSA operations such as implementation of risk assessment rules, passenger and baggage screening, controls over access to secure areas including management of access badges, and oversight of acquisition and maintenance of screening equipment. At the time, Mr. Roth said he believed the Department and TSA leadership had begun "critical self-evaluation" and were positioned to begin addressing some of these issues. However, our work since that time shows that TSA needs to continue its efforts to address persistent problems.

Since 2014, we have audited and inspected various security-related aspects of TSA, including its passenger and baggage screening operations, TSA PreCheck, FAMS, and its information technology (IT) systems. These reviews resulted in OIG issuing 24 reports to TSA with 136 recommendations designed to reduce security vulnerabilities in the aviation transportation system.

### **Covert Testing Continues to Reveal Persistent and Troubling Problems**

We have conducted four covert tests of TSA operations since 2014, during which we assessed checked baggage screening, passenger screening at checkpoints, and most recently, airport access controls. Our findings and conclusions from these tests have been consistent with those of TSA's internal

testing in these areas. Because covert test results are both classified and contain Sensitive Security Information they cannot be discussed here, but we have provided the Department, TSA, and the appropriate congressional committees with our classified reports.

Detection of dangerous items on people and in baggage requires reliable equipment with effective technology, as well as well-trained and alert TSOs who understand and consistently follow established procedures and exercise good judgment. In general, our covert testing has identified vulnerabilities related to people, processes and procedures, and technology. Specifically:

- **People** often contribute to weaknesses in security operations due to complacency or failing to think critically.
- TSA **processes and procedures** are often vague or open to interpretation, which results in security gaps.
- **Technological limitations** sometimes contribute to security weaknesses, even though TSA asserts its first strategic priority is to improve security and safeguard the transportation system.

Reducing these vulnerabilities is critical to ensuring threat objects are not carried on board aircraft and unauthorized individuals who want to cause harm cannot gain access to airports' secure areas. Such actions could cause catastrophic damage resulting in loss of life and property.

We identified vulnerabilities from all four covert tests we have conducted since 2014.<sup>1</sup> To illustrate, in September 2014, through covert testing of the *checked baggage screening* system at U.S. airports, we identified significant vulnerabilities caused by human- and technology-based failures.<sup>2</sup> We determined that TSA did not have a process to assess or identify the cause for equipment-based test failures, or the capability to independently determine whether deployed explosive detection systems were operating at the correct detection standards. According to TSA, from 2009 to the time of our audit, it spent \$540 million for checked baggage screening equipment and \$11 million for training. Notwithstanding this investment, our tests showed that TSA had not improved its checked baggage screening since our 2009 report on the same issue. TSA concurred with all five of our recommendations; to date TSA has implemented corrective action and closed four of the recommendations.

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<sup>1</sup> We also conducted numerous covert tests prior to 2014; however, due to the age of these reports we are not discussing the results in this testimony. For example, [TSA Penetration Testing of Advanced Imaging Technology, OIG-12-06, November 2011](#); [Covert Testing of Access Controls to Secured Airport Areas, OIG-12-26, January 2012](#); [Audit of the Effectiveness of the Checked Baggage Screening System and Procedures Used to Identify and Resolve Threats, OIG-09-42, March 2009](#); [Audit of Access to Airport Secured Areas, OIG-07-35, March 2007](#).

<sup>2</sup> [Vulnerabilities Exist in TSA's Checked Baggage Screening Operations, OIG-14-142, September 2014](#).

In September 2015, we reported on tests we conducted to determine the effectiveness of TSA's *Advanced Imaging Technology* (AIT), which is used at *passenger screening checkpoints* to identify both metallic and nonmetallic threats concealed under passengers' clothing.<sup>3</sup> Our objective was to determine the effectiveness of AIT, Automated Target Recognition software, and checkpoint screener performance in identifying and resolving anomalies and potential security threats at airport checkpoints. We made one recommendation to strengthen effectiveness in identifying and resolving security threats at checkpoints. TSA has taken corrective action and this recommendation is now closed.

In September 2017, we reported the results of our covert testing at 20 airports of different sizes and categories.<sup>4</sup> This time, we conducted tests to determine the effectiveness of *checkpoint screening equipment and screener performance* in identifying and resolving potential security threats at airport security checkpoints. We identified vulnerabilities with screener performance, screening equipment, and associated procedures, collectively attributable to human-, technology-, and procedural-based failures. TSA concurred with all eight of our recommendations. To date, TSA has implemented corrective action and closed one of these recommendations.

Most recently, in February 2019, we reported on our covert testing to determine whether TSA implemented proper procedures to safeguard *secure areas of airports* and whether airports, aircraft operators, and contractors were complying with TSA's security requirements to control access to these areas.<sup>5</sup> We conducted multiple tests at nine different airports of different sizes, including some of the larger airports across the country. We tested each airport's various types of access control systems and employee-screening programs. We also tested private screeners who were part of the Screening Partnership Program. We identified both human and procedural vulnerabilities at various access control points. TSA concurred with all six recommendations. All of these recommendations remain open.

### **Reviews of TSA PreCheck**

In October 2011, TSA introduced the PreCheck initiative in response to congressional authorization to implement trusted passenger programs. Beginning in 2012, TSA immensely increased the use of PreCheck, allowing expedited screening for nearly half of the flying public. TSA did so by:

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<sup>3</sup> [Covert Testing of TSA's Passenger Screening and Technologies and Processes at Airport Security Checkpoints, OIG-15-150, September 22, 2015.](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Covert Testing of TSA's Checkpoint Screening Effectiveness, OIG-17-112, September 27, 2017.](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Covert Testing of Access Controls to Airport Secure Areas, OIG-19-21, February 13, 2019.](#)

- Granting PreCheck eligibility to other Federal Government-vetted or known flying populations, such as those in the CBP Trusted Traveler Programs;
- Establishing and increasing the PreCheck application program, which requires individualized security threat assessment vetting;
- Implementing risk assessment rules; and
- Using “managed inclusion” for the general public, allowing random passengers access to PreCheck lanes without having assessed their risk.

In 2014, we reviewed TSA’s PreCheck initiative to determine (1) the processes and procedures TSA used to ensure TSA vetted program applicants properly; (2) how TSA assessed member continued eligibility; and (3) how TSA tested its processes for effectiveness and timeliness.<sup>6</sup> Although classified or sensitive details cannot be discussed here, we determined that TSA needed to modify PreCheck vetting and screening processes and improve PreCheck communication and coordination.

In 2014, we also received and responded to two whistleblower disclosures related to PreCheck regarding:

- Use of a risk-based rule within Secure Flight<sup>7</sup> that may have created a gap in aviation security;<sup>8</sup> and
- A notorious convicted felon who was improperly cleared for TSA PreCheck screening.<sup>9</sup>

As a result of our work, we made a total of 22 recommendations to address vulnerabilities we identified related to PreCheck. TSA did not initially concur with the majority of the recommendations in our reporting. We have made progress in getting TSA’s concurrence and compliance, closing 17 of the 22 recommendations. However, the recommendations that remain open pertain to significant concerns we have with how TSA is operating PreCheck. We agree with actions TSA has planned to correct these deficiencies but their implementation has been slow. We understand that corrective actions, such as limiting how TSA extends expedited screening, may not be popular with the general public but TSA must prioritize security over customer service.

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<sup>6</sup> [Security Enhancements Needed to the TSA PreCheck Initiative, OIG-15-29, January 28, 2015.](#)

<sup>7</sup> TSA uses the Secure Flight program to screen aviation passengers and certain non-travelers before they access airport sterile areas or board aircraft by comparing their information to TSA watch lists.

<sup>8</sup> [Use of Risk Assessment Within Secure Flight, OIG-14-153, July 2015.](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Allegation of Granting Expedited Screening Through TSA PreCheck Improperly, OIG-15-45, March 16, 2015.](#)

## **TSA Has Not Developed a Cross-cutting Risk-based Security Strategy**

In 2016, we reported that TSA lacked an intelligence-driven, risk-based security strategy to inform security and resource decisions across all transportation modes.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, the agency lacked a formal process to incorporate risk in its budget formulation decisions. We recommended that TSA develop and implement a cross-cutting, risk-based security strategy, ensure risk management oversight and support, and establish a risk-based formal budget process. These efforts would help ensure all transportation modes consistently implement risk-based security and help decision makers align resources effectively. This recommendation is open because TSA has not yet implemented corrective actions.

## **Vulnerabilities Identified in FAMS International Flight Operations**

In December 2018, we reported on FAMS' international flight operations.<sup>11</sup> This work was a follow-up to our 2017 report on FAMS' domestic flight operations.<sup>12</sup> We conducted this audit to determine the extent to which FAMS can interdict an improvised explosive device during flight.

We reviewed FAMS policies and procedures, as well as FAMS After Action Reports reflecting air marshal capabilities. We also met with various explosives experts and observed testing of aircraft explosives. Finally, we visited the TSA Training Center to observe air marshals executing mock drills of onboard threat scenarios as well as several FAMS training courses. Although details are classified or Sensitive Security Information, as a result of our work, we identified vulnerabilities with FAMS' contribution to international flight security. We made two recommendations that, when implemented, should help TSA's overall efforts to strengthen aviation transportation security. We also identified \$394 million in funds that could be put to better use. TSA concurred with both recommendations, which remain resolved and open.

## **Challenges to Retaining, Hiring, and Training TSOs**

TSOs are an integral, last layer of security – responsible for identifying and preventing dangerous items in bags and on passengers from being carried onboard aircraft. TSA must ensure its screening workforce understands how to operate screening equipment, use screening technology, pat down passengers, search bags, control airport terminal entry and exit points, interact with the public, and follow TSA standard operating procedures.

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<sup>10</sup> [Transportation Security Administration Needs a Crosscutting Risk-Based Security Strategy, OIG-16-134, September 9, 2016.](#)

<sup>11</sup> [FAMS' Contribution to International Flight Security is Questionable, OIG-19-17, December 19, 2018.](#)

<sup>12</sup> [FAMS' Contribution to Aviation Transportation Security is Questionable, OIG-18-04, October 24, 2017.](#)

We recently reported that TSA needs to continue to improve its retention, hiring, and training of the TSO workforce.<sup>13</sup> Given the importance of TSOs in achieving the aviation security mission, TSA must address these challenges, which could also save millions in taxpayers' dollars. We recommended that TSA improve its ability to retain TSOs by sharing and leveraging the results of TSO exit surveys and fully conveying job expectations to newly hired TSOs. We noted that by improving retention rates, TSA could save funds otherwise spent to hire and train new TSOs. We also observed that, when hiring TSOs, TSA does not fully evaluate applicants for capability and compatibility. With the resultant inadequate applicant information and a lack of formally documented guidance on ranking potential new-hires, TSA may have been making uninformed hiring decisions and not selecting the most highly qualified individuals. Finally, without a consistent, robust training program, TSA is missing opportunities to strengthen its TSO workforce.

### **TSA Has Not Fully Implemented All of OIG's Security-related Recommendations**

Although TSA has taken action to implement many of our security-related recommendations, 39 have not been implemented, and of these 39, 17 recommendations remain open since Fiscal Year 2017 or earlier.<sup>14</sup> The 17 older recommendations generally relate to:

- testing of screening equipment;
- technological enhancements;
- PreCheck vetting and screening operations;
- developing and implementing a cross-cutting risk-based strategy; and
- implementing a formal budget process that uses risk to inform resource allocation.

Additionally, of the 39 open recommendations, TSA has not provided us with acceptable corrective action plans to meet the intent of four recommendations.<sup>15</sup> These unresolved recommendations relate to determining

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<sup>13</sup> [TSA Needs to Improve Efforts to Retain, Hire, and Train Its Transportation Security Officers, OIG-19-35, March 28, 2019.](#)

<sup>14</sup> Those 11 recommendations are from these reports: [Vulnerabilities Exist in TSA's Checked Baggage Screening Operations, OIG-14-142, September 2014](#); [TSA Oversight of National Passenger Rail System Security, OIG-16-91, May 13, 2016](#); [Transportation Security Administration Needs a Crosscutting Risk-Based Security Strategy, OIG-16-134, September 9, 2016](#); [Covert Testing of TSA's Screening Checkpoint Effectiveness, OIG-17-112, September 27, 2017](#); [Security Enhancements Needed to the TSA PreCheck Initiative, OIG-15-29, January 28, 2015](#); [Allegations of Granting Expedited Screening through TSA PreCheck Improperly, OIG-15-45, March 16, 2015](#); [TSA Could Improve Its Oversight of Airport Controls over Access Media Badges, OIG-17-04, October 14, 2016.](#)

<sup>15</sup> Those 4 recommendations are from these reports: [FAMS' Contribution to Aviation Transportation Security is Questionable, OIG-18-04, October 24, 2017](#); [Covert Testing of Access Controls to Airport Secure Areas, OIG-19-21, February 13, 2019](#); [TSA Needs to Improve Efforts to Retain, Hire, and Train Its Transportation Security Officers, OIG-19-35, March 28, 2019.](#)

the effectiveness of certain operations within TSA, justifying budget requests, and procuring and deploying new technology.

## **Conclusion**

Strengthening TSA's workforce, processes, procedures, and technology, is a challenging but critical undertaking for reducing security vulnerabilities. Commitment to and persistent movement towards effecting such changes — including continued progress towards complying with our recommendations — are paramount to ensuring transportation security. We recognize and are encouraged by TSA's steps to comply with our recent recommendations. Without a sustained commitment to addressing known vulnerabilities, the agency risks compromising the safety of the Nation's transportation systems.

Committed leadership, perseverance, and a dedicated workforce that understands the significant role each member plays are paramount to safeguarding our aviation system. We are committed to continuing to assess TSA's performance, identifying vulnerabilities and areas for improvement, and making recommendations that enable TSA to become more efficient and effective in securing aviation transport to ensure freedom of movement for people and commerce.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement. I welcome any questions you or other members of the Committee may have.