

Statement of Ranking Member Tom Carper
“Frustrated Travelers: Rethinking TSA Operations to Improve Passenger Screening and Address Threats to Aviation”

Tuesday, June 7, 2016

As prepared for delivery:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for calling this important and timely hearing. As we all know, the Transportation Security Administration was created in the wake of the attacks on September 11th. We understand well the terrorist threat to our aviation system that the agency was created to combat. Having said that, though, we oftentimes fail to acknowledge an undeniable tension that exists at the core of TSA’s mission. On the one hand, we ask TSA to screen millions of passengers and their luggage carefully each day to prevent explosives, weapons and other dangerous items from finding their way onboard an aircraft. On the other hand, millions of passengers want to get on board their airplanes on time and without the aggravation that security screening can often bring.

Given the long wait times we have recently witnessed at security checkpoints at a number of airports across America, we know that it can be difficult to strike the right balance between security and convenience. Some might even be tempted to say that we can’t have both, that effective security measures invariably bring with them inconvenience, lines, and even missed flights. I disagree. In fact, I believe that many of the problems we’ve witnessed at some of our airports are eminently solvable. But first we need to better understand the scope of the challenge and its genesis.

After the Department of Homeland Security’s Office of Inspector General produced a very troubling report last year revealing vulnerabilities at TSA checkpoints, Admiral Neffenger took several steps to tighten security. And while the steps he and his team have taken have contributed to longer waits for some, there are other reasons why TSA has struggled lately. Resource constraints and increased air travel have played a significant role. TSA is being asked to do more with less. While inept management and leadership at some airports has been a major factor, the truth is that staffing at TSA has dropped by more than 10 percent since 2011. At the same time, passenger volume at our airports has increased by more than 10 percent. TSA must be nimble enough to handle this growth in air travelers, especially the surges that occur during the busy summer travel season and at other times during the year.

The good news is that Admiral Neffenger and Secretary Johnson have moved quickly to reduce wait times and to do so without compromising security. Based on reports I’ve seen, these efforts are already beginning to bear fruit and helped keep passengers moving during the busy Memorial Day weekend. Is there room for improvement? You bet there is. But security is a shared responsibility, and we each have a role to play. Congress must work with the Administration to ensure that the agency has the resources it needs to effectively carry out its mission. Funding levels in appropriations bills awaiting action in the Senate move us – and TSA – in the right direction. We need to enact them.

But airports and air carriers have an important responsibility to help reduce wait times, too. I have been very encouraged by the willingness of private-sector stakeholders to step up and contribute their own resources and ideas to solving this problem. A longer-term solution is being demonstrated in real time today at London's Heathrow Airport. In the spirit of 'find out what works and do more of that,' TSA launched a similar initiative last month. It's called an 'Innovation Lane,' and I'm sure we'll hear more today about how this partnership with Delta Air Lines in Atlanta will improve passenger throughput by 30 percent.

While that concept shows great promise over the long haul, airlines have already taken a number of other steps that can make a difference now, such as reassigning their own employees to help TSA. Perhaps the most important step we can take is to continue to dramatically grow participation in trusted traveler programs, like Pre-Check, that speed screening for vetted passengers and shorten wait times for those not in Pre-Check lines, too. I'm encouraged by steps TSA has taken so far to increase Pre-Check enrollment. We're told that enrollments have soared from about 3,500 per day a year ago to roughly 16,000 a day in May. I look forward to learning today about additional ways we can encourage enrollment in this program.

In closing, it's important to keep in mind that there are still very real security threats to our aviation system. Today's solution may not work tomorrow. Those seeking to wreak havoc are always changing their tactics, and these evolving threats require that we constantly adjust what we do at our airport security checkpoints and on our airplanes. We also need to stay on top of growth in air travel and changing travel patterns so that TSA and its partners are not caught like they were recently dealing with logistical challenges they aren't prepared for. This is why strong leadership is so critical to seeing us through these very challenging times.

I would like to thank Admiral Neffenger for providing that leadership at a very challenging time for his agency, and for all the work he and his team have done to keep our skies safe. You and the team you lead have a hard job. We ask much of all of you. Too rarely do we say thank you. This burden is not just for all of you to bear. This is a shared responsibility. Each of us needs to do our part. If we do, we'll be much safer as a nation. Let's roll.