

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Bonnie Watson Coleman (D-NJ)

Subcommittee on Oversight and Management Efficiency

Joint Subcommittee Hearing: “How Pervasive is Misconduct at TSA: Examining Findings from a Joint Subcommittee Investigation”

Thursday, July 7, 2016

The Transportation Security Administration provides security at airports throughout the nation and helps secure our nation’s surface transportation systems.

TSA screens over 2 million passengers at 450 airports in the United States daily.

In Fiscal Year 2015, TSA employees screened over 700 million passengers and 400 million checked bags.

Travel in the United States is on the rise, seeing a 15 percent increase from 2013 to 2015.

Airports are expected to experience a significant increase in passenger traffic this summer.

Due to increased passenger volume, decreased appropriations for Transportation Security Officers, and changing procedures due to security screening shortfalls, wait times in the Nation’s airports have increased.

Recently, TSA has come under fire about the passenger wait times and the extravagant bonuses that were paid to a former Assistant Administrator who oversaw security operations while TSA was known to have security lapses.

High profile incidents such as these, in addition to the TSA pay scale and benefits for its frontline personnel, have a devastating effect on the Transportation Security Officers that serve the public on a daily basis.

The performance and morale of TSA personnel should be of utmost importance. However, many of the frontline employees, the Transportation Security Officers, are short staffed and are often asked to work multiple shifts.

In addition, while these TSOs are federal government employees, they are not subject to general civil service provisions that include collective bargaining rights, the ability to appeal adverse actions to the Independent Merit Systems Protection Board, and whistleblower protections.

I believe that the TSA employees, especially those engaged in security screening, should be subject to civil service provisions and that is why I am an original cosponsor of H.R. 4488, the “Rights for Transportation Security Officers Act of 2016”.

This bill, authored by the Ranking Member of the Full Committee, provides the Transportation Security Administration’s (TSA) screening workforce with long-overdue rights, the same rights afforded to most Federal workers under Title 5.

Both the DHS Office of Inspector General and the Government Accountability Office have examined allegations of misconduct by TSA personnel.

Two offenses accounted for more than half of all cases: 1. Attendance and Leave and 2. Screening and Security.

Based on its analysis, GAO found that TSA did not have a proper process for conducting reviews of misconduct to verify whether TSA personnel at airports were complying with policies and procedures.

TSA implemented the recommended changes; however, allegations of misconduct increased by almost 30% from 2013 to 2015.

In Fiscal Year 2015 alone, the DHS OIG received approximately 1,000 complaints either from or about a TSA employee, most of which related to allegations of misconduct.

Specific instances of misconduct included retaliation against whistleblowers, mismanagement, and security failures.

It has also been reported that TSA personnel are afraid to speak up about problems at the agency in fear of being unfairly punished or reassigned to lower positions.

In fact, TSA management has been described by staff as “the biggest bullies in the federal government.”

Allegations of retaliation and mismanagement drastically impact the workplace.

Moreover, it appears that rank and file personnel are disciplined at a much higher rate than management.

It seems as if management is disciplined when there are high profile cases or media attention that brings negative attention to TSA.

For the sixth year in a row, DHS saw an overall drop in employee engagement and morale according to the 2015 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey.

What is even more concerning is TSA in particular is ranked one of the worst places to work in the federal government, coming in 313 out of 320 in the annual survey by the Partnership for Public Service.

Dr. Gowadia, today, I look forward to hearing from you how TSA plans on better managing its workforce, starting from the top, and addressing low morale.

I also look forward to hearing the changes TSA has implemented as a result of the OIG and GAO investigations, particularly the mechanisms implemented to better hold senior management accountable.

I would like to thank the TSO's for their diligent work under such intense responsibility and pressure- during the July 4th holiday travel period, TSA screened 10.7 million travelers, with average wait times in standard security lanes less than 10 minutes.

Thanks to reprogrammed funding from Congress, TSA has been able to hire additional TSOs and increase overtime to address staffing shortages.