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Security At Nation's Highest Risk Airports

Statement of
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Before the
Subcommittee on Government Activities
and Transportation
Committee on Government Operations
House of Representatives

040867

Madam Chairwoman and Members of the Subcommittee:

We appreciate the opportunity to testify on the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) Civil Aviation Security Program. In prior work[1] for this Subcommittee, we presented findings concerning shortcomings of FAA's preboard passenger screening process--a critical component of FAA's Civil Aviation Security Program. We reported that while the aviation security program plays a significant deterrent role and promotes the safety of the traveling public, the screening process could and should be made more effective.

At your request, we are testifying today on various security components, including passenger screening, at the nation's airports with the highest security risk--those designated "category X"[2] by FAA. For security reasons, these airports will not be identified. Our testimony is based on our ongoing review of domestic aviation security. As part of this review, we conducted audit work at 6 of the nation's 16 category X airports, analyzed FAA security inspection reports for all 16 airports, and reviewed the series of reports on domestic aviation security[3] by the Department of Transportation's (DOT) Safety Review Task Force.

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[1]See attached list of GAO reports and testimonies.

[2]FAA has established six airport categories of risk for the nation's 437 airports. Category X airports, of which there are 16, are those airports perceived to carry the highest security risk.

[3]The DOT Safety Review Task Force reviewed, beginning in February 1986, FAA's domestic civil aviation security program and published a series of reports on five aspects of security, including air operations area security and passenger screening.

Our work demonstrates the existence of security deficiencies at the nation's category X airports. FAA inspectors and the DOT Safety Review Task Force noted many of the same deficiencies. Chief among the problems we found were ineffective passenger screening and inadequate controls over personnel identification systems and over access to those parts of the airport where aircraft operate.

Although the specific nature and extent of the security deficiencies varied among airports, the types of deficiencies identified were such that if left uncorrected, they could allow unauthorized persons access to air operations areas and aircraft. In general, air carriers and airport officials at the airports we visited were advised by FAA inspectors to correct these deficiencies, identified either by GAO, FAA, or DOT's work.

SECURITY MEASURES INTERRELATED, BUT DEFICIENCIES CREATE POTENTIAL FOR UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS

In general terms, an airport is divided into two parts: (1) the air operations area which is the part of the airport where aircraft operate, load, and disembark cargo and passengers and (2) the rest of the airport, predominately the terminal, cargo and other buildings, and vehicle parking lots. A hallmark of FAA's aviation security program is redundancy, in that the security measures in place at our nation's airports are interrelated. Generally, if one measure fails, another measure is in place to support the first measure.

FAA regulations for the aviation security program mandate that access to the air operations area be controlled through various interrelated security features. The passenger screening process is one of the most visible features, well known to the traveling public. Other less obvious security features include

-- employee identification systems;
-- the requirement that airport and air carrier employees "challenge" or question the presence of unauthorized persons in nonpublic areas; and
-- perimeter barriers, such as fencing, vehicle gates, air cargo buildings, fire doors, and jetways.

Screening Process

In general, FAA test results and the results of our work show that passenger screening process improvements are needed to ensure that the process effectively prevents firearms, explosives, and other dangerous weapons from being carried on board an airplane and presenting a danger to the traveling public. In July 1987, the DOT Task Force report on passenger screening pointed out that historical evidence shows the overall success of the process. The report also noted, however, that the consequences of a single incident are such that FAA must continually monitor the screening process to assure its effectiveness.

To improve the screening process, we recommended in our July 1987 report that FAA establish a preboard passenger screening standard defining expected performance and that FAA then measure air carrier performance against the standard. DOT and FAA

concurred and, effective October 1, 1987, established a performance standard requiring that passenger screening systems detect all FAA test weapons, or enforcement actions would be taken against the responsible air carrier. This standard should strengthen the performance of the screening process.

However, FAA's current policy on passenger screening cannot ensure that dangerous weapons are not carried through the screening process by airport and air carrier employees and their contractors. Under FAA's policy, air carriers are allowed to decide if employees will be subject to the passenger screening process. We found that some air carriers allow aviation employees with proper identification to bypass passenger screening, while others require all employees to pass through the passenger screening process. The DOT Task Force, in reviewing the screening process, noted that in some cases screening personnel allowed airport and air carrier employees access to restricted areas based on recognition alone.

Personnel Identification

In April 1987, FAA instituted new requirements to improve accountability and control over personnel identification systems. These requirements call for color coded badges which reflect access area authorization and include an expiration date. At category X airports, implementation of computerized identification systems is also required. FAA will consider these systems to be compromised when 5 percent of the issued badges at each airport cannot be properly accounted for.

During our review, we found that in general, airport officials were not properly accounting for and controlling personnel identification badges. Our verification of airport personnel identification cards for four aviation service companies located at one category X airport showed that three of the four companies had terminated employees and had reportedly returned badges to the airport officials. These officials, however, had no records of the badges being returned. At another category X airport, airport officials stated that approximately 16 percent of about 38,000 (or over 6,000) badges could not be accounted for. At this same airport, we visited three other service companies who were not tracking the retrieval of badges from terminated employees. These companies said they could only guess at the number of lost badges.

The DOT Task Force noted that some airports lacked an effective means of recovering badges from separated employees and that at many airports identification badges were issued without an expiration date. The Task Force also noted that at some airports identification badges were issued categorically authorizing access to all areas of the airport, even to persons whose jobs did not require such broad access.

"Challenging" Unauthorized Persons

Airport and air carrier employees are required to challenge or question the presence of unauthorized persons in the air operations area as well as in baggage rooms, cargo areas, and other nonpublic areas. This challenge procedure has been referred to as a last line of defense; that is, if the other security features of an

airport have been breached, the last security feature to be encountered before gaining access to the aircraft would be the airport or air carrier employee who is to challenge any unauthorized person.

At most airports we visited, there were shortcomings in the effectiveness of the challenge procedures. With the full knowledge and cooperation of FAA inspectors, we gained access to air operations areas, including aircraft, without being challenged by the airport and air carrier employees who saw us. Without wearing identification, we entered open or unlocked cargo doors, walked through the buildings or gates and out onto the air operations area, and had access to cargo shipments or aircraft. In all cases, personnel were present who could have challenged us.

In addition to employees' not following proper challenge procedures, we found numerous instances at one airport in which air carrier employees were not displaying their identification badges as required. FAA officials acknowledged that the incentive to challenge is seriously diminished when most of an employee's coworkers are not displaying identification as required. Our tests also demonstrated that given the right clothing, an unauthorized person could easily go unnoticed. For example, we gained easy access to restricted areas while attired in clothing similar to that worn by one airline's flight attendants.

Perimeter Barriers

To minimize the possibility of unauthorized entry, FAA regulations require that all openings in the perimeter should be

controlled and that perimeter barriers such as fences and buildings be kept clear of trees, stowed equipment and material, and vehicles which could facilitate the climbing of such barriers. In some cases, control of certain exits, such as fire doors, is considered adequate if restricted area signs and challenge procedures are used during airport operational hours.

In general, we found that access to the air operations area could be gained by walking through perimeter buildings, including post office and air cargo buildings. Given the ineffectiveness of challenge procedures, we were able to walk through unalarmed fire doors and through jetways to gain access. For example, at one airport, we exited the terminal through the jetway at which an aircraft was waiting for boarding. The air carrier representative responsible for controlling the jetway was inside the parked aircraft talking to crew members. When asked why the door to the jetway was left open, he said that it was too hot in the terminal to close the door and that he was still "controlling" access even though he was in the aircraft and not positioned at the jetway door. After pointing out that we had already gained access without his seeing us, he acknowledged that he could not properly control access from his particular vantage point inside the parked aircraft.

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In summary, deficiencies in aviation security are not just limited to the passenger screening process. In general, we believe that a heightened sensitivity to the importance of security is

needed. The results of our review are preliminary and we are currently focusing on specific steps that should be taken to ensure this heightened sensitivity. Among the issues we are examining are FAA's air carrier and airport inspection coverage and the adequacy of FAA's guidance and followup to make certain that deficiencies are identified where they exist and corrected in a timely way. Because FAA has been working to implement the DOT task force recommendations, we will also be addressing in our report the status of these corrective actions.

On the basis of the work we have completed to date, however, we believe there are several steps FAA could take in the near term to improve security at category X airports. These steps include

-- inventorying identification badges at the category X airports to determine the number unaccounted for and to take action to ensure controls over identification systems are put in place;

-- reemphasizing airline and airport employee responsibility to challenge the presence of unauthorized persons and stress the importance of properly displaying employee identification; and

-- evaluating the extent to which individual airlines should be permitted to exempt employees from the passenger screening process.

This concludes my testimony, Madam Chairwoman. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.

ATTACHMENT I

LISTING OF RECENT GAO REPORTS AND TESTIMONIES RELATING TO AVIATION SECURITY

REPORTS

AVIATION SECURITY: FAA PREBOARD PASSENGER SCREENING TEST RESULTS (GAO/RCED-87-125FS, Apr. 30, 1987).

AVIATION SECURITY: FAA NEEDS PREBOARD PASSENGER SCREENING PERFORMANCE STANDARDS (GAO/RCED-87-182, July 24, 1987).

TESTIMONIES

FAA's PREBOARD PASSENGER SCREENING PROCESS. Subcommittee on Government Activities and Transportation; Committee on Government Operations (GAO/T-RCED-87-34, June 18, 1987).

FAA's IMPLEMENTATION OF A PERFORMANCE STANDARD FOR PASSENGER SCREENING PROCESS. Subcommittee on Government Activities and Transportation (GAO/T-RCED-88-4, Oct. 22, 1987).