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Opening Statement

Rep. Gerald E. Connolly, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Government Operations

Hearing on "TSA Oversight: Examining the Screening Partnership Program."

January 14, 2014

Thank you, Chairman Mica, for holding today's oversight hearing of the Transportation Security Administration's (TSA) Screening Partnership Program (SPP). Following September 11 terrorist attacks, Congress established TSA to safeguard our Nation's commercial aviation transportation system. Today, TSA is responsible for screening airline passengers and baggage at more than 450 airports throughout the United States.

In 2004, TSA created the SPP to enable commercial airport operators to apply to forgo Federal screeners in favor of qualified private-sector screening contractors that meet Federal standards and requirements, and who operate under Federal oversight. There are currently fourteen airports where passenger screening is performed by a private contractor and six additional airports are awaiting contract awards, which I understand will be announced this year. Of these twenty airports, nearly half are small airports located in Montana.

In 2012, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) performed an assessment of the performance of SPP airports. While the details of that analysis are classified, GAO did find that some SPP airports performed slightly above the national average on some measures while others performed slightly below.

GAO also recommended in its report that TSA develop a mechanism to monitor performance of private screeners versus Federal screeners. TSA concurred with the recommendation and has begun the long overdue process of evaluating private screener performance to ensure air travel remains secure. Although the detailed results of these assessments are sensitive or classified, I nonetheless look forward to hearing what is being done to correct subpar performance.

Proponents of expanding the SPP program assert that private screeners improve efficiency and reduce costs compared to Federal screeners. However, TSA's own cost estimates have found the opposite, concluding that private screening costs are generally between 3 to 9 percent higher than the cost of Federal screening. In light of the discrepancy between cost-

have found the opposite, concluding that private screening costs are generally between 3 to 9 percent higher than the cost of Federal screening. In light of the discrepancy between cost-savings claims, and the Chairman's concerns over the validity of the cost-estimate methodology employed by TSA, I am interested in examining this matter closely to ensure that Congress and TSA utilize the most accurate performance and cost data available to inform both oversight and operations.

It is no secret that debates over TSA often elicit strong reactions from Members and the public alike, often stemming from anecdotal – yet very real – instances of inconvenience and perceived poor customer service. Thus, it is important that we also recognize the incredibly difficult task we have entrusted TSA with – balancing the need to conduct vigilant security screening of *all* passengers and cargo, while simultaneously carrying out excellent customer service. This is no easy task, and while we must never waver in holding TSA accountable for improving its performance, Members should also take a moment to express our appreciation and offer a sincere “thank you” to the thousands of dedicated Transportation Security Officers and contractors serving at airports across the country.

In closing, I believe that the stakeholders gathered here today may have more in common than is readily apparent at first glance. Surely we can all agree that our Nation's aviation system must be safe and secure and that we must always ensure taxpayers are getting the best value for their investment in homeland security. The bottom line is that where deficiencies exist in screening operations – whether run by a TSA contractor or TSA itself – we must correct them, period. Where deficiencies exist in screening performance and cost data analytics – we must fix those as well, period.

I would like to thank our witnesses for participating in this morning's hearing and I look forward to examining how we can enhance the SPP's effectiveness, responsiveness, and efficiency. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

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