

**United States Senate  
Commerce, Science, and Transportation  
Hearing of the Subcommittee on Security**

**The Honorable Roger Wicker Chairing  
*Improving Security at America's Airports:  
Stakeholder Perspectives***

**Thursday, October 17, 2019**



**Testimony of**

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Chairman Wicker, Ranking Member Cantwell and Members of the Committee:

My name is Sara Nelson, International President of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, AFL-CIO (AFA), representing 50,000 Flight Attendants at 20 airlines. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on improving airport security. This subject is critically important to aviation's first responders. We also serve as the last line of defense in aviation security.

### **TSA Workforce**

Flight Attendants strongly support maintaining a professional, federal Transportation Security Administration workforce as part of the overall solution to safety and security in commercial aviation.

On September 11, 2001, I was based in Boston as a United Airlines flight attendant. Before 9/11, I had worked United flight 175 frequently. It could have been me on that fateful day, but instead it was people I knew and worked with, including my good friends Amy King, Michael Tarrou, Amy Jarret, Kathryn Laborie, Robert Fangman, Al Marchand, Alicia Titus, Marianne MacFarlane, and Jesus Sanchez. Security is very personal for me and my flying partners. It is also fundamental to our ability to do our jobs.

I remember airport security prior to September 11th. I remember the faces of the screeners who allowed terrorists entrance to terminal C at Logan and the ability to board flight 175. I remember the screener's faces because they were there all the time, 7 days a week, all hours of the day. I remember the sounds of their voices, their tired smiles, and their efforts to work the long hours for the lowest bidding security company just so they could provide for their own families. I lost my friends, my profession was redefined and our world changed forever, but I also often wonder how those security agents have coped with their part in failing to stop the most fatal attack on US soil. Do they understand they were set up to fail?

When airport security was federalized, security improved immediately. When TSOs took over airport security, my personal security improved dramatically. When TSOs won the right to be represented by the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), our security improved again because TSOs finally had a voice in their workplace. Efforts by TSA to

standardize training at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center has also created a more cohesive program and unified commitment to TSA's mission.

AFA further supports full collective bargaining rights for Transportation Security Officers to negotiate for better working conditions, putting TSA officers on the General Schedule pay scale, and providing officers with much needed statutory worker protections such as the Rehabilitation Act against unfair labor practices. We believe these worker rights are integral to maintaining a strong, engaged workforce for aviation security.

Safety and security doesn't just happen; it happens because we all work together to make it happen. My colleagues and I depend on TSA workers to keep our jobs safe. Federalizing airport screening has been a success, improving the security of air travel and providing a rigorous review of our aviation security with oversight by legislators and input from aviation stakeholders and the traveling public. Crew and passengers are safer today because of it. We continue to depend upon a regulated security system that meets the requirements of *The Implementing Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act of 2007 (9/11 Commission Act)*, [Pub. L. 110-53](#).

### **Adequate Long-Term Funding**

Effective passenger and baggage screening is a vital part of our layered defense against terrorism in the skies. It is also a difficult job with massive responsibility.

On a fairly regular basis there has been an attempt to return to the old system where security checkpoints were contracted out to the lowest bidder. To return to a bottom-line driven system that puts security second to profits borders on reckless and is an unjustified regression from TSA's successful mission 'to protect the nation's transportation systems to ensure freedom of movement for people and commerce.'

The Flight Attendants of this country act as first responders every day of the year and our lives depend on the integrity of each layer of security in the airport and on the aircraft. TSA must have the consistent, long-term funding to give screeners the staffing, support and training they need to do their jobs to help keep our skies safe and secure.

Government shutdowns result in weakened aviation security. Transportation security officers

who are required to report for work for without getting paid during a shutdown face added stress over unpaid bills and uncertainty about when their paychecks will resume. This is an enormous distraction for the people charged with handling security on the frontlines.

We commend the efforts of TSA Administrator David Pekoske and the entire agency for extraordinary efforts during the 35-day government shutdown. Under extraordinarily difficult situations, the Administrator and the entire federal workforce worked around the clock to maintain airport security and the ability for aviation to continue service. The shutdown stretched people and resources. It put our security at risk. It should never be repeated.

Before the deadline in September of this year, Congress passed a stopgap spending measure to fund the government through November 21, 2019. While this averted another Government Shutdown in September, we are once again setting up a cycle of short-term funding measures for aviation safety and security. This will further slow work on the implementation of the Act. The Senate Homeland Security Committee estimates that the 35-day Government Shutdown cost the DOT 2,413 years in worker productivity<sup>1</sup>. Further, the dedicated work of federal employees deserves our respect and support with long-term funding measures.

We also oppose diverting funding and resources from TSA to other security initiatives, such as border security. Reduced staffing at checkpoints isn't just an inconvenience—when TSA is stretched thin, it increases the risk of a serious security breach.

Flight Attendants often bear the brunt of travelers frustrated by any inefficiencies in security screening, making our workspace more volatile. Long lines also threaten air travel ticket sales and on-time operations. Diverting resources, cuts to funding, or failure to lock in long term funding can delay purchase of advanced screening equipment and other mission-critical investments designed to keep travelers safe and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of security, as well as undermine programs to support TSA workers and keep them on the job.

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<sup>1</sup> Shutdown cost DOT, DHS thousands of years in lost productivity, POLITICO Pro, <https://t.co/O3478qNmFc?amp=1>, September 17, 2019

We urge lawmakers to ensure funding is adequate and stable to maintain the successful mission of TSA.

### **Known Crewmember Program**

Known Crew Member is a risk-based screening program that recognizes airline crew are subject to extensive background and criminal records checks to ensure security and safety of flight. In light of the trusted status of airline crew with FAA Certification, the Known Crew Member program provides alternate, expedited screening procedures. This helps to properly allocate more TSA resources to lesser known persons accessing the sterile areas of airports.

On Saturday afternoon, August 24, 2019, TSA announced changes to the KCM program without consulting unions representing airline crew members. This resulted in confusion and misunderstanding among crew members as well as TSA personnel as to what procedures were going to be implemented and when. It also raised concerns about purpose of the sudden change, causing distractions across aviation.

While we believe there are many lessons to be learned from the initial program change announcement from TSA, we also want to recognize the immediate response and problem-solving efforts of Administrator Pekoske and Deputy Administrator Cogswell. TSA worked closely with our union and the Air Line Pilots Association to receive our concerns and proposed solutions to maintain the integrity of the program with the most efficient procedure changes for crew and TSOs alike.

In the future, any time TSA considers changes to KCM or the standard security program for airlines or airports, that affect crew members and flight security, the agency should provide notice in advance to union security representatives in order to obtain union input and perspective on how to best achieve the goals that TSA has identified. Past experience has shown that such input is valuable and benefits aviation security operations. Crewmember unions and airlines are necessary industry stakeholders that should be regularly informed and engaged for the most successful security programs and operational implementation.

## **Current Legislation**

AFA supports two pieces of legislation before this committee. The Faster Act (S. 472) which would ensure aviation security service fees pay for the costs of security screening and the Cyber AIR Act (S. 2181) which would help protect from and require disclosure of any attempt or successful cyber-attacks.

## **Conclusion**

I would like to again thank the Chairman, the Ranking Member and the Members of this Subcommittee for this opportunity to testify. We are proud of our work as aviation's first responders and the last line of defense in aviation security. We appreciate your attention and diligent efforts to ensure we have the proper tools to perform our work and keep U.S. aviation safe and secure.