Committee on Government Reform

MEDIA ADVISORY

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Contact: David Marin
(202) 225-5074

Government Reform Committee to Review Airline Passenger Screener Training, Testing and Supervision

What did we learn from Nat Heatwole?
Why were government covert testers able to bring weapons on board?
Are screener tests a joke?
Is speedy passenger processing trumping security?

What: House Government Reform Committee Oversight Hearing:
"Knives, Box Cutters, and Bleach: A Review of Passenger Screener Training, Testing and Supervision"

When: Thursday, November 20, 2003, 10 a.m.
[Immediately Following Business Meeting]

Where: Room 2154, Rayburn House Office Building

Background:

Approximately 1.8 million travelers a day pass through checkpoints at more than 400 U.S. airports. The daunting task of protecting America's transportation system could not be more critical in today's threat environment. The Committee on Government Reform recognizes that airline passenger screening is a particularly difficult task and is only a single layer in TSA's multi-layered aviation security strategy, which includes hardened cockpit doors, additional federal air marshals, and armed pilots.

Despite significant seizures of prohibited items from passengers going through TSA security checkpoints, recent events highlight possible weaknesses in the system.

Press reports and court documents indicate that in six separate incidents, Mr. Nat Heatwole, a twenty-year old college student, was allegedly able to get prohibited items -- including box cutter blades, knives, and liquid bleach -- past airport passenger screeners and onto aircraft. Notes accompanying the items he allegedly left on aircraft indicated the items were intended to test the TSA checkpoint security procedures. TSA also received an e-mail message from Mr. Heatwole concerning the security breaches on September 15, 2003; however, the

message was not discovered until October 17, 2003, **after** some of the prohibited items had been accidentally found and **after** TSA ordered 7,000 aircraft to be searched.

These incidents were not merely embarrassments to America's transportation security apparatus, but also cause for loss of confidence in the safety of air travel.

In addition to Mr. Heatwole's alleged security breaches, two recent government reports cause concern regarding aircraft passenger screening. A Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General (DHS-IG) report and a General Accounting Office (GAO) report cite significant weaknesses in the testing and training procedures for TSA airport screeners. The DHS-IG investigation found that testing was designed to maximize the likelihood TSA employees would pass tests rather than ensuring that only competent and well-trained employees were operating explosive detection systems. The GAO report cited deficient supervisory training programs and a failure to collect adequate information on screener performance in detecting threat objects.

More disconcerting was the DHS-IG's covert testing of passenger security screening operations. According to press articles, IG investigators were able to bring knives, a bomb, and a gun through Logan International Airport without being detected.

TSA has stated that it has made changes to operating procedures for the TSA contact center, which can receive tens of thousands of e-mails, telephone calls, and pieces of correspondence per day, to ensure that future security-related messages are immediately analyzed by TSA staff and that appropriate action is taken. TSA has also stated that new procedures for passenger screener training and testing are in the works and that specific training courses designed for screener supervisors are being developed to improve screener performance.

On the other hand, some of the five private pilot program airports, which use private companies for passenger screening, have said TSA does not seek input for screener improvements from private sector sources or screeners themselves. In addition, screeners continue to face pressure to process passengers quickly, despite the fact that they are not permitted to allow passengers into airport sterilized areas without resolving all possible threats identified in both passenger and carry-on baggage checks. Furthermore, maintaining adequate staffing levels for passenger screening checkpoints continues to challenge TSA, and as the holiday travel season quickly approaches this will be a serious concern.

Through this hearing, the Committee intends to hear about the lessons TSA has learned as a result of the Nat Heatwole incident and the GAO and IG reviews. In addition, given the upcoming high-volume travel season, the Committee hopes to discuss how TSA is preparing to process holiday travelers while ensuring aircraft security and passenger safety.

WITNESSES

Panel One
Mr. Stephen McHale, Deputy Administrator, Transportation Security Administration

Panel Two
Ms. Cathleen A. Berrick, Acting Director, Homeland Security and Justice Issues, General Accounting Office
Mr. John DeMell, President, FirstLine Transportation Security
Mr. James McNeil, Chief Executive Officer, McNeil Technologies Inc.
[Accompanied by Mr. Mike Broida, Site Manager, Greater Rochester International Airport]

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