

Wednesday, December 16, 2009

Opening Statement of Chairwoman Sheila Jackson-Lee (D-TX) as prepared
Subcommittee on Transportation Security and Infrastructure Protection
Committee on Homeland Security

Hearing:

Has the TSA Breach Jeopardized National Security? An Examination of What Happened and Why

We are here today to discuss last week's revelation that a TSA manual containing Sensitive Security Information was posted by TSA on the Internet without proper technical safeguards. As a result, sensitive information about our airports and screening policies was made available for the world to see.

My colleagues and I were alarmed by this development, as it sent shockwaves across Capitol Hill. This Subcommittee takes its oversight of TSA very seriously; after all, TSA was constructed to help protect the American people from the very type of events that transpired on September 11, 2001. When events, such as last week's, are made public, it becomes all too clear that more must be done and that TSA must keep its eye on the ball.

Today, we will be evaluating how this happened, the security ramifications of this misstep, and how we are going to avoid similar lapses in the future.

Before we go further, let me be clear that, although this was a serious breach in the management of sensitive information, I have been assured by TSA that additional personnel and procedures have been put into place at airports across the country to ensure the safety of the traveling public.

Any terrorist group or individual wishing to exploit this situation should beware: The United States will continue to use all available resources to protect the flying public. During this busy holiday season, the American people should know that it is safe to fly.

Last week, Chairman Thompson and I sent a letter to TSA urging a third party review of this incident. I am happy to learn that Secretary Napolitano responded and requested that the Inspector General investigate and provide recommendations regarding this incident. I look forward to this report.

In addition, I commend TSA for taking steps in response to this incident. For example, I have been informed by TSA that 5 people have been placed on administrative leave. This subcommittee, however, also needs assurance that TSA is reviewing its processes for the handling and posting of Sensitive Security Information.

Questions we have include: Who in TSA's management is ultimately responsible for this process? Is there a manual for training employees on how to post such information? What is the role of contract employees in the handling and disseminating of Sensitive Security Information? And, is there sufficient training for contract employees?

One of the lessons made clear by this incident is that TSA needs permanent, effective leadership. Our witness today, Acting Administrator Rossides, has led TSA during a very active year, but the person nominated by the President to lead TSA, Mr. Errol Southers, has had his confirmation held up in the Senate. We need action on his nomination immediately. I hope all stakeholders will also call for his swift confirmation. Our homeland security efforts can no longer afford delay.

On a personal note, I want to take a moment to acknowledge the passing of a member of the TSA family, Mr. Ed Kelly. Ed managed TSA's cargo screening program and testified before this subcommittee just this past March. Ed was an incredibly dedicated individual and a consummate professional who left retirement after the September 11th attacks in order to work on behalf of our Nation's homeland security efforts. On behalf of the subcommittee Members and staff, my condolences are expressed to his family and to his colleagues at TSA.

Finally, I would like to point out that this subcommittee understands the enormity and importance of TSA's mission and the dedication of its employees but, after last week's announcement about the disclosure, I think we can all agree that TSA can do better, and that is why we are here today. After a complete analysis of this incident, we will determine how to make the agency and its employees perform better and give the American people more confidence in TSA.