



A bold voice for transportation workers

FIGHTING THE SCOURGE OF TSA PRIVATIZATION

On February 21st of this year, the Greater Orlando Aviation Authority (GOAA) voted to begin the process of transitioning from Transportation Security Administration (TSA) security screening operations at the Orlando International Airport to a private screening contractor. Ultimately, due to the public outcry of passengers, elected officials and union members, GOAA abandoned their efforts to privatize the airport's security operations in late March. That the initial vote to privatize was even had, however, is cause for concern. Orlando International Airport would have been the first major airport to privatize screening operations under the Screening Partnership Program (SPP), and it would have set a troubling precedent and threatened the jobs of dedicated Transportation Security Officers (TSO). The circumstances surrounding the GOAA vote reinforce the need for Congress to scale back SPP and make greater investment into TSA and its workforce.

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Congress created TSA with the passage of the Aviation and Transportation Security Act (ATSA). The reasoning was clear: one federal agency is better equipped to oversee the security operations at our nation's airports than the handful of private security firms that were in place throughout the country. Shortly after passage, however, special interest groups got to work trying to pry this work – and the taxpayer dollars that come with it – back from federal jurisdiction. Their work was embodied by SPP, which was originally passed as a pilot program for a limited number of airports who have to apply and receive approval from TSA and comply with TSA security standards. Over the years, however, the restrictions on SPP have been gradually loosened, and now 22 airports have private operations. Recently, there have been proposals in Congress to further expand SPP and reduce TSA oversight.

These proposals are irresponsible, and ignore both the lessons that lead to TSA's creation and the real and substantive reforms that are needed to further improve the agency. As TTD's Executive Committee has noted before, TSA is [not perfect](#). TSA needs more resources to invest in its workforce and technology, and staffing shortages remain a serious problem. Furthermore, while TSO's have been granted the right to union representation, they [still lack](#) many of the basic rights and worker protections afforded to other federal employees, including other employees at the Department of Homeland Security. These problems contribute to low employee morale and higher turnover rates than are typical in other federal agencies. Privatizing screening operations would do nothing to fix these problems and in fact would make it harder to achieve and maintain safe and efficient airport screening.

The federal government is not beholden to profit margins or shareholders. It also has the resources and security intelligence to identify changing threats and deploy best-practices strategies to TSOs and screening operations throughout the country. If given adequate resources and proper reforms, TSA remains the best way to keep our nation's transportation system safe.

The debate over the GOAA's plan to privatize its security screening operations embodies many of the misleading arguments in favor of privatization. When the facts were laid bare, the rush to privatize was exposed as a ploy for corporate enrichment. While proponents of privatizing touted the need to improve customer service and decrease wait times, the GOAA's own website proudly claims that the Orlando International Airport is the "#1 ranked Mega-Airport for Customer Satisfaction". Travelers agree, as a Valencia College poll found that 90 percent of passengers were satisfied or very satisfied with their screening experience. As the airport continues to see an increase in passengers, the transition from public to private screeners would have likely resulted in more delays, not fewer. As Senator Bill Nelson, ranking member of the Senate Commerce Committee noted in a letter to GOAA opposing this plan, "there is no established playbook for carrying out such a complex transition... Such a transition might result in costly security lapses, could significantly inconvenience a large number of travelers passing through the airport, and will almost certainly negatively impact the lives of 1,100 dedicated transportation security officers who currently perform security screening duties as employees of the TSA." There was no demonstrated benefit to the public, only to the private companies vying for a federal contract. This misguided plan died because unions and public officials made their voices heard and wouldn't accept the tired and misleading talking points being used to justify corporate greed.

TTD member unions include those in the aviation sector that depend on safe, secure and efficient passenger and cargo screening at our nation's airports, and recognize that federal TSOs play a crucial role in making this the safest aviation system in the world. Efforts to privatize TSA screening operations are counterproductive and need to be rejected by Congress and the administration. Greater investment in the TSA workforce and infrastructure, as well as smart, sensible reforms to TSA that empower its federal workforce are needed to improve the airport experience and keep the flying public safe.

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