



A bold voice for transportation workers

TIME TO REFORM THE AIRPORT CONTRACT SCREENING PROGRAM

Too often, front-line federal Transportation Security Officers (TSOs) are demonized and scapegoated for simply doing their jobs and implementing policies dictated by the Transportation Security Administration (TSA). In this environment, calls for turning over more TSA screening responsibility to the private sector become a convenient and all too predictable rallying cry among those who believe that government is always the problem or who want to enrich certain private contractors. The truth is that federal TSOs have served our nation and its aviation system well in an extremely difficult time and working environment. And contracting out is not the advertised elixir that many claim and in fact creates oversight and security issues that must be addressed.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) recently found that TSA has failed to ensure proper oversight of private companies that provide passenger and baggage screening services and to conduct the proper analysis of private versus federal screener performance. Additionally, existing law does not do enough to ensure that only qualified and trusted entities provide security service at our nation's airports. Specifically, under current law, there is a process for subsidiaries of foreign-owned corporations to obtain contracts for screening and take over these important homeland security functions.

To address many of these concerns and to protect the rights of the current TSA workforce, Rep. Bennie Thompson (D-MS), the Ranking Member of the House Homeland Security Committee, has introduced H.R. 1455, the Contract Screener Reform and Accountability Act. H.R. 1455 would require security breaches at airports with contracted screening services to be reported to TSA officials. The bill would provide better accountability and transparency by preventing any screening services to be performed by a subcontractor. The bill also takes steps to guarantee that TSA has the ability to adequately judge the effectiveness of private screeners. It would mandate covert testing (a procedure used in federal TSO operations) of contract screeners so that performance can be monitored and compared to that of federal screeners. And it requires imposition of penalties on those that would compromise these tests. Airports that utilize private screeners would also be required to disclose this information to the flying public and the private contractors used would have to track and report all passenger complaints.

The Thompson bill also takes steps to ensure that current federal screeners are treated fairly if an airport chooses to privatize its screening services and that contracts be awarded properly. Transportation labor grows weary of the verbal abuse directed at these professionals from certain members of Congress. Besides prohibiting foreign-owned companies from obtaining screening contracts, the bill would mandate that private companies provide existing personnel the right of first refusal to jobs and offer compensation and benefits equal to or greater than what they receive at the time of the contracting out. In other words, this legislation addresses legitimate concerns that poorly regulated private contracting of these services could return us to the pre-9/11 days when security contractors were cited for substandard performance and poor working conditions.



We applaud Rep. Thompson for introducing this bill and will advocate for its swift passage. The nation's aviation security regime needs a more balanced process for evaluating private screening companies as well as clear and fair rules to protect the current TSO workforce. The front-line dedicated employees go to work every day with one goal in mind: to keep our nation's aviation system safe and secure. It is time to protect the flying public from shoddy contracting and give TSOs the support they have earned.

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