

AMERICA ON THE GLOBAL STAGE: EXAMINING  
EFFORTS TO SECURE AND IMPROVE THE U.S.  
TRAVEL SYSTEM AND PREPARE FOR SIGNIFI-  
CANT INTERNATIONAL EVENTS

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HEARING  
BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON  
TRANSPORTATION AND MARITIME  
SECURITY  
OF THE  
COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY  
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
ONE HUNDRED NINETEENTH CONGRESS  
FIRST SESSION  
APRIL 8, 2025  
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**AMERICA ON THE GLOBAL STAGE: EXAMINING EFFORTS TO SECURE AND IMPROVE THE U.S. TRAVEL SYSTEM AND PREPARE FOR SIGNIFICANT INTERNATIONAL EVENTS**

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**Tuesday, April 8, 2025**

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,  
COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY,  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND  
MARITIME SECURITY,  
*Washington, DC.*

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:10 a.m., in room 310, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. Carlos A. Gimenez (Chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Present: Representatives Gimenez, Crane, Biggs of South Carolina, McIver, Kennedy of New York, and Thompson of Mississippi (ex officio).

Mr. GIMENEZ. The Homeland Security Subcommittee on Transportation and Maritime Security will come to order.

Without objection, the Chair may declare the subcommittee in recess at any point.

Before we begin today's hearings, I want to take a moment to acknowledge the absence of a valued Member of our subcommittee. We are mourning the loss of our friend and colleague, Congressman Turner. Sylvester's decades of dedicated public service to the people of Houston and his contributions to this Nation and Congress will be remembered as part of his lasting legacy. My thoughts and prayers are with his family, especially his daughter and grandson, as they grieve his passing and honor his life of service.

I also want to welcome the gentleman from Louisiana, Mr. Carter, to the subcommittee.

Today's hearing will assess the current state of U.S. travel security and infrastructure, evaluating the readiness of airports, ports, and border entry points to manage large influxes of international travelers while ensuring the security measures, technological advancements, and operational processes meet future needs.

I now recognize myself for an opening statement. Good morning, I want to thank everyone for being here today, especially our witnesses, as we take a closer look at how the United States is preparing to welcome the world over the next few years for significant international events.

Beginning this summer, the United States will step onto global stage by housing the FIFA Club World Cup. This tournament will feature a league of professional clubs from around the world, such

as Real Madrid, Manchester City, Inter Miami FC, my hometown team. It will take place at select venues throughout the United States. This event will provide an early opportunity to stress test our travel systems, infrastructure, and security coordination ahead of even larger events on the horizon.

In 2026, our country will host a FIFA World Cup with matches played by national teams in cities across the Nation. I am thrilled that this includes my home city of Miami. At the same time, we will celebrate America's 250th anniversary in July 2026, followed by the summer Olympics and Paralympics in Los Angeles in 2028.

When I was mayor of Miami-Dade County, I witnessed first-hand just how much planning and hard work goes into ensuring these major events run smoothly. As a Member of Congress, I intend to do all I can to make sure that these international events are safe for millions of Americans and those traveling here or planning or attending.

These events are more than just celebrations or competitions; they are major opportunities to show the world what America stands for and what we can achieve. If we get this right, the payoff could be enormous. According to the U.S. Travel Association, we could generate nearly \$95 billion in economic activity and welcome over 40 million international visitors. That will only happen if we plan ahead, invest wisely, and make sure that the travel experience in the United States is smooth, modern, and secure.

Right now, we have work to do. A recent report from the United States Travel Association makes it clear that, while the United States remains one of the top destinations for international travels, we now rank last among the top travel destinations when it comes to national planning and leadership.

Long waits for visas, outdated airport technology, and staffing shortages at our ports of entry are slowing us down. These problems are not just frustrating; they could cost us jobs, investment, and global influence. This is why I support President Trump's recent Executive Order creating a White House task force focused on the 2026 World Cup. This kind of coordination is exactly what we need. It brings people to the table and sends a strong message that the United States is serious about being ready.

I am currently working on a bill that will take this a step further by creating a Federal task force to focus on all major international events occurring in the United States over the next 4 years. That includes the World Cup, America's 250th, and the 2028 Olympics. We need to make sure every agency involved is working together and that our policies and resources are aligned.

We also need to think about security. Big crowds and high-profile venues make these big events targets. That includes threats from drones, which are becoming more common around stadiums and public gatherings. We need to make sure agencies like DHS, TSA, and State and local law enforcement have the tools and coordination they need to stop these threats in the planning stage long before they can cause harm. We should take this opportunity to make long-needed reforms to our travel system. We need to make the system more thorough and effective while still being welcoming to legitimate travelers. That means better technology at airports, shorter visa wait times, and making sure that we have enough offi-

cers at our ports of entry. The world will be watching. With the right vision and coordination, the United States can set the global standard, not just for security but for innovation, hospitality, and safety.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses about how we turn that vision into the reality.

[The statement of Chairman Gimenez follows:]

STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN CARLOS A. GIMENEZ

APRIL 8, 2025

Good morning. I want to thank everyone for being here today, especially our witnesses, as we take a closer look at how the United States is preparing to welcome the world over the next few years for significant international events.

Beginning this summer, the United States will step onto the global stage by hosting the FIFA Club World Cup. This tournament will feature elite professional clubs from around the world, such as Real Madrid, Manchester City, and Inter Miami FC, and will take place at select venues throughout the United States. This event will provide an early opportunity to stress-test our travel systems, infrastructure, and security coordination ahead of even larger events on the horizon.

In 2026, our country will host the FIFA World Cup with matches played by national teams in cities across the Nation, and I am thrilled that this includes my home city of Miami. At the same time, we will celebrate America's 250th anniversary in July 2026, followed by the Summer Olympics and Paralympics in Los Angeles in 2028. When I was mayor of Miami-Dade County I witnessed first-hand just how much planning and hard work goes into ensuring these major events run smoothly. As a Member of Congress, I intend to do all I can to make sure these international events are safe for the millions of Americans and those traveling here who are planning on attending.

These events are more than just celebrations or competitions. They are major opportunities to show the world what America stands for and what we can achieve.

If we get this right, the payoff could be enormous. According to the U.S. Travel Association, we could generate nearly \$95 billion in economic activity and welcome over 40 million international visitors. But that will only happen if we plan ahead, invest wisely, and make sure the travel experience in the United States is smooth, modern, and secure.

Right now, we have work to do. A recent report from the U.S. Travel Association made it clear that while the United States remains one of the top destinations for international travelers; we now rank last among the top travel destinations when it comes to national planning and leadership. Long waits for visas, outdated airport technology, and staffing shortages at our ports of entry are slowing us down. These problems are not just frustrating, they could cost us jobs, investment, and global influence.

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We should take this opportunity to make long-needed reforms to our travel system. We need to make the system more thorough and effective, while still being welcoming to legitimate travelers. That means better technology at airports, shorter visa wait times and making sure we have enough officers at our ports of entry.

The world will be watching. And with the right vision and coordination, the United States can set the global standard—not just for security, but for innovation,

hospitality, and safety. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses about how we turn that vision into reality.

Mr. GIMENEZ. Now I recognize the Ranking Member, the gentlewoman from New Jersey, Mrs. McIver, for her opening statements.

Mrs. MCIVER. Good morning. Thank you to our witnesses for joining us today.

Thank you to Chairman Gimenez for holding today's hearing.

I too want to join in on just expressing our condolences and sympathy to Representative Turner's family—who passed away, who was a part of this committee—as we continue to pray and keep his family and his friends and his close colleagues in our thoughts. So definitely join us in that and sending well wishes to his family.

The travel and tourism industry is a vital part of the U.S. economy. In November 2021, President Biden signed the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act into law, providing a \$1.2 trillion investment in American transportation and infrastructure. In December 2022, President Biden signed an omnibus spending package into law funding pay raises and an expanded collective bargaining framework for TSA employees. These historic investments have helped spur continued growth in U.S. travel and tourism and helped secure our transportation networks.

In 2024, travel in the United States produced an economic output of \$2.8 trillion and supported more than 15 million American jobs, and record numbers of passengers traveled through TSA security checkpoints. To continue to grow the U.S. travel system and prepare for upcoming international events, any sane administration would continue to invest in our infrastructure, update our security technology, and support our Federal work force.

Unfortunately, President Trump and Republicans in Congress are doing the exact opposite. Take for example making investments in cutting-edge security technology to fund new CT scanners and other equipment at TSA checkpoints at the necessary scale and pace. Congress must stop using passenger security fee collections as a slush fund and return that money to TSA. But, instead, Republicans are considering increasing passenger security fees and using that money to help pay for tax cuts for billionaires, according to a document showing their reconciliation plans.

Republicans want to charge airline passengers more and then put the money in billionaire pockets. The passenger security fee was created to help fund TSA and prevent another 9/11, but Republicans care more about giving tax cuts to billionaires. That's despicable.

Let's turn to work force issues. Transportation security officers are the backbone of our transportation security system as they screen millions of passengers and pieces of luggage every day to keep our skies safe. Yet, over the past month, President Trump and Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem have taken the first steps in dismantling the professional aviation security work force we have worked so hard to build over the past 2 decades.

On March 7, Secretary Noem ended TSA's 7-year collective bargaining agreement and dismantled union rights in a political and illegal move to advance President Trump's union-busting agenda. I am glad this move is being challenged in the courts. But, in the

mean time, it undermines the TSO work force just as it had finally stabilized after decades of high attrition.

Worse yet, the termination of TSA's collective bargain agreement may pave the way for Project 2025's goal of privatizing the agency, an effort Republicans in Congress are already trying to advance. Privatizing more than 400 airports and over 50,000 screening officers would throw the entire aviation security system into chaos and return us to the pre-9/11 model that failed to prevent the largest terrorist attack in U.S. history.

Democrats will fight tooth and nail to prevent Republicans from sacrificing our national security at the altar of corporate greed. Unfortunately, the problems the Trump administration is creating for travel and tourism industry go well beyond TSA. In 2024, the International Trade Administration reported a 9 percent increase of international visitors to the United States. Under the Biden administration, U.S. tourism was booming and open for business. However, in just 2 months since President Trump took office, he has managed to throw that all away by detaining tourists, attacking allies, and tanking the economy.

The list of countries that have changed their advisory to warn travelers to the United States of potential risk is growing longer by the day. That list now includes the United Kingdom, Germany, Norway, Ireland, the Netherlands, Denmark, Finland, Belgium, and Canada.

Canadians who visit the United States more than anyone are now canceling their trips, as flight bookings from Canada have dropped by 70 percent. Since Trump took office, several travelers trying to enter the United States have been turned away or detained for days or weeks with little to no explanation.

A French scientist scheduled to attend a conference in Houston was turned away reportedly because his personal device contained opinions criticizing Trump's research's policies. A Canadian was put in a jumpsuit and chains and detained for over 2 weeks as she legally went through the process to obtain a work visa. A German tourist spent more than 6 weeks in a detention center, including 8 days in solitary confinement, because she was traveling with tattooing equipment.

Through these cases and others, Donald Trump is sending the message that visitors to the United States may be arrested without explanation. Trump is sending a message that the United States is closed for business. Trump's policies put at risk trillions of dollars in tourism spending and millions of American jobs. Let me be clear, if you aren't, even from watching the news today: Donald Trump is tanking the economy.

I look forward to discussing with our witnesses how the dire situation will impact our national security and the success of upcoming high-profile events like the World Cup and the Olympics.

Thank you. With that, I yield back.

[The statement of Ranking Member McIver follows:]

STATEMENT OF RANKING MEMBER LAMONICA MCIVER

APRIL 8, 2025

The travel and tourism industry is a vital part of the U.S. economy.

In November 2021, President Biden signed the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act into law, providing a \$1.2 trillion investment in American transportation and infrastructure. In December 2022, President Biden signed an omnibus spending package into law, funding pay raises and an expanded collective bargaining framework for TSA employees.

These historic investments have helped spur continued growth in U.S. travel and tourism and helped secure our transportation networks. In 2024, travel in the United States produced an economic output of \$2.8 trillion and supported more than 15 million American jobs, and record numbers of passengers traveled through TSA security checkpoints.

To continue to grow the U.S. travel system and prepare for upcoming international events, any sane administration would continue to invest in our infrastructure, update our security technology, and support our Federal workforce. Unfortunately, President Trump and Republicans in Congress are doing the exact opposite. Take, for example, making investments in cutting-edge security technology.

To fund new CT scanners and other equipment at TSA checkpoints at the necessary scale and pace, Congress must stop using Passenger Security Fee collections as a slush fund and return that money to TSA. But instead, House Republicans are considering increasing Passenger Security Fees and using that money to help pay for tax cuts for billionaires, according to a document showing their reconciliation plans. Republicans want to charge airline passengers more and then put that money in billionaires' pockets.

The Passenger Security Fee was created to help fund TSA and prevent another 9/11—but Republicans care more about giving tax cuts to billionaires. That's despicable. Let's turn to workforce issues.

Transportation Security Officers are the backbone of our transportation security system, as they screen millions of passengers and pieces of luggage every day to keep our skies safe. Yet over the past month, President Trump and Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem have taken the first steps in dismantling the professional aviation security workforce we have worked so hard to build over the past 2 decades.

On March 7, Secretary Noem ended TSA's 7-year collective bargaining agreement and dismantled union rights in a blatantly political and illegal move to advance President Trump's union-busting agenda. I am glad this move is being challenged in the courts, but in the mean time it undermines the TSO work force just as it had finally stabilized after decades of high attrition.

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Privatizing more than 400 airports and over 50,000 screening officers would throw the entire aviation security system into chaos and return us to the pre-9/11 model that failed to prevent the largest terrorist attack in U.S. history. Democrats will fight tooth and nail to prevent Republicans from sacrificing our national security at the altar of corporate greed. Unfortunately, the problems the Trump administration is creating for the travel and tourism industry go well beyond the TSA.

In 2024, the International Trade Administration reported a 9 percent increase of international visitors to the United States. Under the Biden administration, U.S. tourism was booming and open for business. However, in just the 2 months since President Trump took office, he has managed to throw that all away by detaining tourists, attacking allies, and tanking the economy. The list of countries that have changed their advisories to warn travelers to the United States of potential risks is growing longer by the day.

That list now includes the United Kingdom, Germany, Norway, Ireland, the Netherlands, Denmark, Finland, Belgium, and Canada. Canadians, who visit the United States more than anyone, are now canceling their trips, as flight bookings from Canada have dropped by 70 percent. Since Trump took office, several travelers trying to enter the United States have been turned away or detained for days or weeks with little to no explanation.

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risk trillions of dollars in tourism spending and millions of American jobs. Let me be clear: Donald Trump is tanking the economy.

I look forward to discussing with our witnesses how this dire situation will impact our national security and the success of upcoming high-profile events like the World Cup and the Olympics.

Mr. GIMENEZ. Thank you.

I now recognize the Ranking Member of the committee, the gentleman from Mississippi, Mr. Thompson.

Mr. THOMPSON. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Let me welcome our witnesses on the panel today.

I am glad the subcommittee is examining the state of U.S. travel system ahead of high-profile international events. The outlook for the World Cup, the Olympics, and other major events set to be hosted in the United States over the next few years is dire. In just a couple of short months in office, Donald Trump and his Republican lackeys have done tremendous damage to the U.S. travel and tourism. People visiting the United States can no longer be confident that they will be treated fairly by our Government.

Just last week, a renowned mixed martial arts fighter and coach trying to visit the United States for a seminar was detained upon entry, sent to a Federal detention facility, and ultimately sent back to Australia—all without little explanation. If this is how we treat foreign athletes and coaches visiting the United States, one can only imagine how the World Cup and Olympics will go.

This is just one of the many instances of the Trump administration inflicting unnecessary trauma upon foreign visitors. The cruelty is the point. Donald Trump apparently does not want foreign visitors to visit the United States, even though travel represented \$2.8 trillion of U.S. economic output in 2023.

The impact of Trump's chaotic and undefined detention and deportation policies is already apparent. Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, Ireland, Norway, Finland, Denmark, Belgium, and the Netherlands have all updated travel guidance for people visiting the United States to warn of potential for detention or discrimination. Airline bookings from Canada, which provides the most visitors to the United States by far, is already down 70 percent. The impacts of this loss of international travel will be devastating to local economies.

In 2023, more than \$1.3 trillion in travel spending contributed \$89 billion in tax revenue to States and communities across the country. More than 15 million American workers are either directly employed or heavily supported by the travel industry.

Some of those workers are also facing more direct assaults from the Trump administration. Last month, Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem issued a memo to strip TSA employees of their union rights and rescind their existing collective bargaining agreement. Transportation security officers screen millions of passengers every day to protect air travel. For many years, the TSA work force was plagued by low morale and high attrition.

In 2022, President Biden signed into law an omnibus spending bill providing pay raises and funding and expanded collective bargaining framework for TSOs. Those measures have had a dramatic impact on TSA's ability to carry out its security mission, as attrition has dropped in half.

Undoing this progress is dumb, cruel, and illegal. The Secretary cannot unilaterally rescind a binding legal contract. I hope the courts will put a stop to this nakedly political madness. In the mean time, I am proud to have reintroduced my bill, the Rights for the TSA Workforce Act, which would provide TSA workers with full collective bargaining rights and a fair pay under title 5 of the U.S. Code.

Now is the time for Members of both parties to stand up against Donald Trump and push back against his cruel and foolish policies. Donald Trump is putting America last. The U.S. travel and tourism industry will be among the Trump administration's first casualties if we do not change course quickly.

Thank you again to our witnesses for joining us today to discuss this critical challenge.

I yield back, Mr. Chair.

[The statement of Ranking Member Thompson follows:]

STATEMENT OF RANKING MEMBER BENNIE G. THOMPSON

APRIL 8, 2025

The outlook for the World Cup, the Olympics, and other major events set to be hosted in the United States over the next few years is dire.

In just a couple short months in office, Donald Trump and his Republican lackeys have done tremendous damage to U.S. travel and tourism. People visiting the United States can no longer be confident they will be treated fairly by our Government.

Just last week, a renowned mixed martial arts fighter and coach trying to visit the United States for a seminar was detained upon entry, sent to a Federal detention facility, and ultimately sent back to Australia—all with little explanation. If this is how we treat foreign athletes and coaches visiting the United States, one can only imagine how the World Cup and Olympics will go.

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The impacts of this loss of international travelers will be devastating to local economies. In 2023, more than \$1.3 trillion in travel spending contributed \$89 billion in tax revenues in States and communities across the country. More than 15 million American workers are either directly employed or heavily supported by the travel industry. Some of those workers are also facing more direct assaults from the Trump administration.

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In 2022, President Biden signed into law an omnibus spending bill providing pay raises and funding an expanded collective bargaining framework for TSOs. Those measures have had a dramatic impact on TSA's ability to carry out its security mission, as attrition has dropped in half. Undoing this progress is dumb, cruel, and illegal.

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Now is the time for Members of both parties to stand up to Donald Trump and push back against his cruel and foolish policies. Donald Trump is putting America last. The U.S. travel and tourism industry will be among the Trump administration's first casualties if we do not change course quickly.

Mr. GIMENEZ. Thank you to the Ranking Member.

Other Members of the committee are reminded that opening statements may be submitted for the record.

I am pleased to have a distinguished panel of witnesses before us today on this critical topic. I ask that our witnesses please rise and raise your right hands.

[Witnesses sworn.]

Mr. GIMENEZ. Let the record reflect that the witnesses have answered in the affirmative.

Thank you and please be seated.

I would now like to formally introduce our witnesses. Mr. Geoff Freeman is the president and CEO of the U.S. Travel Association, the leading advocate for \$1.1 trillion U.S. travel and hospitality industry. Mr. Freeman is a seasoned association CEO with a proven track record of building successful organizations that unite members' interest, grow members' values, increase revenue and unlock growth opportunities. Prior to joining U.S. travel, Freeman was president and CEO of the Consumer Brands Association, the trade association for America's \$2.1 trillion food, beverage, and consumer products industry.

Mr. Jon Gruen is the CEO and executive chairman of Foreign Technologies, a tech company that provides artificial-intelligence-enabled air space awareness and counter-drone solutions to defense, law enforcement, and commercial customers. Previously, Mr. Gruen was a corporate business development and strategy lead for Lockheed Martin. Prior to joining Lockheed Martin, Mr. Gruen was a Navy SEAL officer, where he served in increasing leadership positions in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. He is currently a Naval Reserve captain and has commanded unmanned air systems and technology innovation units. Jon received his bachelor of science degree from the United States Naval Academy and received his master of business administration from the Haas School of Business, University of California Berkeley.

Dr. Everett Kelley is the national president of the American Federation of Government Employees, which is the largest union representing Federal and D.C. government employees. He began his first term of service as national president in February 2020, was elected to another term during the 42nd national convention in June 2022, and was reelected during the 43rd national convention in August 2024. Dr. Kelley has been a member of AFGGE since 1981. He worked at Anniston Army Depot and retired from there after 30 years of service.

I thank each of our distinguished witnesses for being here today. Also, I would like to offer the following letter from the Airlines for America, for the record.

Without objection, so ordered.

[The information follows:]

## LETTER FROM AIRLINES FOR AMERICA (A4A)

April 4, 2025.

The Honorable CARLOS A. GIMENEZ,  
 Chairman, U.S. House Homeland Security Subcommittee on Transportation and  
 Maritime Security, H2-176 Ford House Office Building, Washington, DC 20515.  
 RE: Hearing on “America on the Global Stage: Examining Efforts to Secure and Im-  
 prove the U.S. Travel System for Significant International Events.”

DEAR CHAIRMAN GIMENEZ: As the United States prepares for upcoming inter-  
 national events over the next decade, Airlines for America (A4A)<sup>1</sup> welcomes the op-  
 portunity to submit comments for the record regarding your hearing entitled “Amer-  
 ica on the Global Stage: Examining Efforts to Secure and Improve the U.S. Travel  
 System for Significant International Events.”

With preparations already under way for the FIFA Club World Cup in 2025, FIFA  
 World Cup 2026, and the International Summer Olympic Games in 2028, A4A and  
 our member airlines are committed to working with the Government to ensure trans-  
 it to and from these events is safe and secure. Aviation plays a key role in our  
 Nation’s critical infrastructure and our sector’s operations are dependent and reliant  
 upon the Federal agencies we interact with including the Transportation Security  
 Administration (TSA) and the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP).

As a result of these dependencies and as the subcommittee provides oversight of  
 the preparation of these events, A4A offers the following recommendations for con-  
 sideration:

DESIGNATE EVENTS APPROPRIATELY TO ENSURE INTERAGENCY COORDINATION AND  
 ADEQUATE HUMAN AND TECHNOLOGY CAPITAL INVESTMENT

A4A member airlines are adept at supporting high-profile events designated as  
 Special Event Assessment Rating (SEAR) events or National Special Security  
 Events (NSSE) by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). In these instances,  
 the DHS applies a risk-based methodology to assign a rating based on the threat,  
 vulnerability, and consequences for each event. These security ratings determine the  
 level of Federal assistance needed to support large-scale events with supplemental  
 resources such as the TSA’s Federal Air Marshals (FAMS), Visible Intermodal Pro-  
 tection and Response (VIPR) teams, explosive detection canine teams, venue screen-  
 ing and field intelligence teams, and forward deployed Transportation Security Offi-  
 cers (TSOs) as a part of the National Deployment Force (NDF). TSA has dem-  
 onstrated its ability to adequately staff and support similar events as seen during  
 last year’s Superbowl and the Republican and Democratic National Conventions,  
 which occurred without any significant aviation security risks or operational im-  
 pacts.

Adequately staffing the DHS component agencies which support the aviation sec-  
 tor is vital to our industry. U.S. airlines operate 27,000 flights per day around the  
 globe, transporting an average of 2.7 million passengers to/from more than 80 coun-  
 tries each day and move more than 61 tons of cargo daily to/from more than 220  
 countries. Domestically, in 2024 alone, U.S. airlines set records for single-day pas-  
 senger travel, TSA had over 30 record-setting passenger screening days, and on  
 Sunday, December 1, 2024, the TSA set an all-time high record surpassing 3 million  
 passengers screened in a single day. Internationally, in 2024, U.S. travel grew 9 per-  
 cent year over year surpassing the largest domestic growth rate since the pandemic.  
 In order for these trends to continue, and to be accommodated, it is paramount that  
 TSA and CBP are provided the leadership and resources needed to adequately plan  
 for future passenger travel and cargo transportation demands and the staffing levels  
 necessary to effectively and efficiently operate airport checkpoints and major Ports  
 of Entry (POEs).

One major component of providing those resources would be the repeal of the di-  
 version of TSA Passenger Security Fee, as all fees collected for security should go  
 directly toward their intended purpose. Ending diversion would restore \$10 billion  
 in funding to modernize TSA and put new identity verification, on-person screening  
 and baggage scanning technology in every U.S. airport lane within 5 years. Equally  
 important are investments in checked baggage screening Explosive Detection Sys-  
 tems (EDS), cargo screening algorithms, detection standards, and at-scale screening  
 methods to include the use of canine.

<sup>1</sup>A4A is the trade association for the leading U.S. airlines, both passenger and cargo carriers.  
 Members of the association are Alaska Airlines; American Airlines; Atlas Air; Delta Air Lines;  
 FedEx; Hawaiian Airlines; JetBlue Airways; Southwest Airlines; United Airlines; and UPS. Air  
 Canada is an associate member.

Additionally, since 2004, checked baggage EDS recapitalization has been funded by the Aviation Security Capital Fund (ASCF). The ASCF currently provides \$250 million each fiscal year, and its authorization will sunset at the end of fiscal year if not extended or modernized. We urge the committee to ensure these important technology funds remain a priority.

PRIORITIZE ADVANCE PLANNING AND INFORMATION SHARING TO MANAGE AVIATION SECURITY AND OPERATIONAL IMPACTS

In 2024, A4A reported a record-setting summer travel season transporting an increase of 6.3 percent more passengers than the year prior. As international passenger travel returned last year, CBP experienced a significant number of peak passenger facilitation days as well.

In addition to TSA's ability to support SEAR 1 and NSSEs, it must manage operations during peak travel seasons in the United States including spring break, Memorial Day, July 4th, and other significant holiday periods. A4A and our member airlines have robust stakeholder engagement at both the Headquarters and local airport levels. Bidirectional communication and information sharing is critical for advance planning to ensure adequate resources are available and contingency plans are ready in anticipation of unexpected weather, screening equipment failures, or other unforeseen events. In advance of peak travel periods, TSA briefs industry on its operational staffing plans that includes key metrics projecting how many people are expected to travel and undergo screening, the estimated busiest travel days based on prior year and estimated growth data, how many officers are needed to support screening operations and what their plans are for forward deploying officers or other additional resources like passenger screening canine teams or prepositioning equipment parts to the busiest airport locations.

As the United States prepares for these significant international events, TSA must also consider creative ways to manage unprecedented travel volumes and the pressure this will put on the traditional checkpoint locations. The Reimbursable Screening Services Program (RSSP) is a pilot program that enables TSA to be reimbursed for establishing and providing screening services outside an airport terminal's existing primary screening area for passengers. Authorized as a pilot program by Congress in 2019, this allows TSA to enter into reimbursable agreements with up to 8 TSA regulated entities, as outlined in 49 CFR Part 1500, to provide screening services at locations other than primary passenger terminal screening areas. Under program agreements, selected participants will reimburse TSA fully for all personnel and non-personnel costs associated with establishing and providing these additional security screening services. Congress should extend this authorization to allow for a larger number of locations and for a longer period of time.

LEVERAGE INNOVATION FOR SECURITY AND FACILITATION DURING LARGE-SCALE EVENTS

The airline industry drives innovation through constant investment in new technologies and services. We believe industry's contributions lead to better security and facilitation outcomes. The aviation industry is undergoing a digital transformation, with new technologies being integrated into every aspect. From on-line booking and self-service check-in to biometric identification and artificial intelligence, technology is changing how we travel. In the last year, there has been a significant increase in the use of biometric technology, such as facial recognition, at airports for security and boarding procedures. This technology enhances security and efficiency while improving the passenger experience by reducing wait times and eliminating the need for physical document checks.

By investing in modernized infrastructure and technologies, the United States can reduce long airport screening times, streamline customs processes, and eliminate bureaucratic delays, all while strengthening national security. CBP is working with industry on solutions that improve the arrival process. For example, Seamless Border Entry (SBE) is a new benefit for trusted travelers that provides a touchless experience and minimizes delays while entering the country through Global Entry. Similarly, CBP is working with aviation stakeholders to make improvements to the international arrival process for U.S. Citizens in the air environment. The Enhanced Passenger Process (EPP) leverages technology to increase efficiencies by connecting the passenger's identity through the auto-capture photograph of a traveler; conducting a U.S. citizen check and performing a real-time vetting check. Our members are working closely with CBP to promote the use of digital applications such as Global Entry (GE), NEXUS, SENTRI, and Mobile Passport Control (MPC) to help expedite the arrival of eligible passengers, allowing CBP to focus on processing the additional volume of arriving foreign nationals. We recommend the committee sup-

port and encourage DHS, CBP, and TSA effectively utilizing and leveraging innovation to better the travel experience.

The use of recreational drones during special events or the potential for nefarious activity is something DHS and Congress should take seriously and ensure Counter-Unmanned Aircraft Systems (C-UAS) legislation is passed. Federal agencies have long called for expanded C-UAS authorities beyond the Department of Justice and DHS remit, and A4A would like to see TSA designated as a lead Federal agency with authority to detect, track, identify, and mitigate threats to aviation in the airport environment.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide recommendations and we look forward to working with the committee to help promote innovation while prioritizing the safety and security of the traveling public.

Sincerely,

HALEY GALLAGHER,

*Vice President, Security and Facilitation, Airlines for America.*

Mr. GIMENEZ. I now recognize Mr. Freeman for 5 minutes to summarize his statement.

Mr. Freeman, you're recognized for 5 minutes.

**STATEMENT OF GEOFF FREEMAN, PRESIDENT AND CHIEF  
EXECUTIVE OFFICER, U.S. TRAVEL ASSOCIATION**

Mr. FREEMAN. Thank you, Chairman Gimenez, Ranking Member McIver, Ranking Member Thompson, Congressman Crane, I appreciate the opportunity to be with you today.

I'm Jeff Freeman, president and CEO of the U.S. Travel Association, representing all aspects of the \$2 trillion travel industry: airlines, airports, theme parks, hotels, destinations from coast to coast. I want to thank you at the outset for your appreciation for the travel industry and the impact that it has.

Travel is a vital economic engine, contributing nearly \$3 trillion annually and supporting more than 15 million jobs across the United States, more than 10 percent of our Nation's work force.

Travel strengthens America's global standing, encourages business and cultural exchange, and generates significant tax revenue. In 2024, international visitors alone contributed \$181 billion to our economy.

But we can't count on this continued success without investments and reforms. Our infrastructure is failing to keep pace with the increasing demand for travel. For example, the Transportation Security Administration screened more than 3 million travelers on 2 occasions last year. By 2028, we are projected to see 100 days per year with that same volume. Our systems, from security to customs to air traffic control, are outdated and not prepared for this surge.

It is not just about inefficiencies. It is also about global competition. Countries like China, India, and Saudi Arabia are making rapid advancements to their travel infrastructure, and we risk falling behind if we don't act swiftly.

The next decade presents a tremendous opportunity. Major events like the 2026 World Cup, America's 250th anniversary, and the 2028 Olympics are expected to spur domestic travel and bring millions of international travelers to the United States. But, without modernizing our travel infrastructure, we will not capture the full economic benefit of these events.

President Trump's creation of the White House task force for the World Cup is a step in the right direction, but much more is necessary to ensure that our country can maximize the travel opportunity.

To help meet these challenges U.S. Travel developed a comprehensive blueprint for the future of American travel, focusing on the following key policy recommendations: No. 1, we need greater government leadership. Travel needs dedicated leadership at the highest levels of government. We urge Congress and the administration to prioritize travel policy and create a sustainable model for overseeing travel improvements from end to end.

No. 2, we've got to address visa processing reform. Long delays and visitor visa processing hurts our ability to attract international visitors. We recommend providing full-strength consular staffing, extending visa validity for vetted lawful visitors, and establishing a national vetting service to lead visa processing. This will ensure the United States remains an attractive destination while maintaining strong national security.

No. 3, we have got to revolutionize TSA screening. Airport screening relies on inconsistent, unpleasant, and manual processes. We recommend immediately ending the diversion of the passenger security fee and increasing technology funding to place new identity verification on person-screening and baggage-screening technology in every U.S. airport lane within the next 5 years. This will improve security, reduce wait times, and create a more seamless experience, allowing all travelers to carry water bottles and larger liquids, leave all electronics in their bags, and keep their shoes, jackets, and belts on their person.

Finally, we have got to create a world-class customs process. We need to modernize the international arrival process for our guests. We recommend increasing CBP officer staffing at airports of entry while using biometric technology and enhanced traveler vetting to reduce processing times. This will allow the automated entry of trusted travelers and returning Americans while enabling CBP officers to focus their inspection efforts on unknown individuals.

These 4 steps are critical to ensuring the United States remains a global leader in travel and that our infrastructure can handle the increasing demand. The status quo is not an option. Travel demand is growing. Our infrastructure is aging. Global competitors are moving quickly. If we fail to act, we risk losing economic opportunities, diminishing America's competitive edge, and foregoing millions of foreign visitors.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Freeman follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF GEOFF FREEMAN

APRIL 8, 2025

Chairman Gimenez, Ranking Member McIver, Chairman Green, Ranking Member Thompson, and Members of the Subcommittee on Transportation and Maritime Security: Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the U.S. Travel Association. I am Geoff Freeman, president and CEO of the U.S. Travel Association, the leading organization advocating for the travel industry in the United States. Our association represents every segment of the travel industry—airlines, airports, hotels, theme parks, rental car companies, cruise lines, and destinations—working together to grow travel to and within the United States.

## 1. INTRODUCTION TO U.S. TRAVEL AND THE TRAVEL INDUSTRY

Travel is an economic powerhouse in the United States, driving nearly \$2.9 trillion in economic activity each year. The travel industry supports more than 15 million jobs across the country—representing more than 10 percent of the U.S. workforce. These jobs span a diverse range of sectors, from aviation to hospitality to destination services. Beyond the numbers, travel drives critical tax revenue at the Federal, State, and local levels and strengthens America’s standing in the world by fostering international diplomacy and business.

In 2024, international visitors injected \$181 billion into our economy. Beyond its economic contributions, the travel industry helps strengthen America’s standing globally, attracts talent and investment, and encourages cultural exchange. The United States is a world leader in travel, but we now face growing challenges that threaten both the future of the industry and America’s competitive edge.

## 2. THE AMERICAN TRAVEL SYSTEM IS UNDER PRESSURE

The reality is: Bold leadership is required now to prioritize travel. Our travel systems are under pressure, and without immediate action, we risk falling behind. Last year, TSA broke records screening more than 3 million passengers not once, but twice. By next year, TSA will hit that number 50 times annually—equivalent to 50 Thanksgiving days in a single year. By 2028, we’re looking at 100 days per year with 3 million screenings. These numbers reflect the exponential growth in demand for air travel, as more people travel domestically and internationally.

However, our travel infrastructure is not equipped to handle these increasing numbers. We face:

- *Bureaucratic inefficiencies.*—Long wait times at TSA checkpoints, customs, and visa processing hurt both the travel experience and our economy.
- *Outdated technology.*—Much of our air traffic control (ATC) infrastructure still uses antiquated systems that need modernizing. Airport security and customs technology also need significant investment to streamline passenger flow and maintain high security standards.
- *Global competition.*—Countries like China, India, and Saudi Arabia are rapidly advancing their travel infrastructure, putting the United States at risk of losing market share. These nations are making massive investments in their travel sectors, leaving the United States vulnerable if we don’t act decisively.

Without modernization, we risk not only missing out on economic opportunities but also failing to meet the growing demands of global travelers. The competition is moving fast, and we must accelerate our own efforts to keep pace.

## 3. GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY WITH A MEGA DECADE OF EVENTS

The next decade presents an extraordinary opportunity for the United States to further solidify its leadership in global travel. Major events over the next 4 years such as the 2025 Club World Cup, Ryder Cup, the 2026 World Cup, America’s 250th anniversary, and 2028 Olympics are expected to contribute nearly \$100 billion in economic activity and bring an estimated 40 million international travelers.

However, with this tremendous opportunity comes a set of challenges. The surge in travel will place immense pressure on our infrastructure, and we must ensure we are ready to handle the increased demand. This means addressing key issues in safety, security, and efficient travel facilitation. If we fail to modernize and adapt, we risk not fully capturing the economic benefits and the potential for growth these events will bring, while giving our competitors the chance to question our leadership on the global stage.

We are grateful for President Trump’s immediate action to establish the White House Task Force on the FIFA World Cup 2026, which will provide senior leadership and coordination across Government to ensure the United States is fully prepared to accommodate the millions of travelers expected for the 2025 Club World Cup and the 2026 World Cup. By bringing together the necessary resources and expertise, the task force will provide the foundation for a transformative mega decade of events that will benefit not only the travel industry but the Nation as a whole.

Through this effort, we have an opportunity to drive innovation, modernize infrastructure, and ensure America remains a premier destination for travel and business. With careful planning and strategic investments, we can leverage this moment to further strengthen our economy, enhance security, and showcase America’s role as a global leader in the travel and hospitality sectors.



## 4. VISION FOR AMERICAN TRAVEL DOMINANCE

To meet these challenges head-on, U.S. Travel has worked alongside a slate of distinguished commission of leaders to create a comprehensive blueprint for the future of American travel. This is the Congress that can truly usher in robust innovation, make wholesale upgrades, and create a new system that sets America apart from the rest of the world.

Our proposed solutions focus on transforming the entire travel experience, from pre-travel planning to arrival, to ensure a seamless and secure process for travelers. The United States is currently the only G20 nation without a dedicated leader or agency overseeing travel policy. We encourage Congress and the administration to ensure a similar sustainable model that prioritizes travel policy and drives meaningful progress for decades to come.

Our full report and recommendations can be viewed at [showcaseamericantravel.org](http://showcaseamericantravel.org) and I have included an executive summary of the report as an addendum to my testimony. Here are the key components of our vision:

- *Government Leadership.*—Bold leadership from the highest levels of government is essential. We commend President Trump's creation of Task Force 250 and the 2026 World Cup Task Force, and we urge continued focus on ensuring our travel infrastructure is ready for the future.
- *Visa Processing Reform.*—Long delays in visa processing remain a major barrier to attracting international visitors—with some U.S. embassies and consulates seeing more than 400-day wait times for visa applicants to secure an interview. We recommend reforms to streamline and reduce bureaucratic delays, ensuring that the United States remains an attractive destination for global travelers while continuing to strengthen national security.
- *Revolutionizing TSA Screening.*—It's time to rethink aviation security. The last breakthrough in airport screening was TSA PreCheck, which is more than a decade old. It's time for the next big leap in innovation. By equipping every TSA lane with state-of-the-art biometrics, advanced imaging technology (AIT), and Computed Tomography (CT) baggage scanners within 5 years, we can significantly improve security while reducing wait times. A largely manual operation that creates an inefficient and unpleasant process for both officers and travelers can become a modern, automated experience where officers focus on risk and travelers can carry larger liquids and leave their shoes, jackets, and belts on.
- *Creating a World-Class Customs Process.*—We must modernize U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) operations to make the arrival process as seamless as possible. This means implementing advanced traveler vetting and biometric capabilities to dramatically reduce processing times at airports—allowing U.S. travelers to clear customs faster than ever, and Trusted Travelers passing through without even stopping—thanks to full automation. With the right tools and increased CBP staffing at international airports, we can maintain the highest levels of security while facilitating the smooth entry of millions of lawful visitors for these global events.
- *Modern and Fully-Staffed Air Traffic Control System.*—The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) is approximately 3,000 controllers short of its staffing needs and 77 percent of the most critical facilities across the system are understaffed. The ATC system relies on decades-old radar, paper strips, and systems run on floppy disks. We applaud President Trump and Secretary Duffy for their commitment to expanding pathways for controller certification. We call on Congress to do its part by providing full funding for ATC staffing, providing emergency appropriations to rapidly upgrade key parts of the ATC system, and by designating ATC investments as mandatory spending.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The next decade represents a defining moment for the American travel experience. The status quo is not an option. Travel demand is surging, our infrastructure is aging, and global competitors are moving fast. If we fail to act, we risk turning travelers away, ceding economic opportunities, and compromising our leadership in the world. The steps we take today will determine whether the United States remains the global leader in travel or struggles to keep pace with competitors.

Travel is not just an economic driver—it is essential to America's global competitiveness and leadership. U.S. Travel stands ready to partner with Congress and the administration to ensure we modernize our infrastructure and unlock the full economic potential of our travel system. But we cannot afford to wait. This is the future of travel. It's bold, it's achievable—and it's time to make it happen.

I look forward to working with you to make this vision a reality. Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

America is no longer the top destination for global travel. International visitation to the United States peaked in 2018 under President Trump but has failed to reach those levels since. The United States now ranks behind Spain and France in the global competition for visitors. China is on a path to catch or surpass us over the next decade. Our competitors are investing billions to leapfrog the United States and win a bigger share of the \$11.1 trillion in economic benefits from the global travel market.

It's time for a new strategy—a strategy to secure America's global travel leadership and establish the United States as the world's top destination. Just regaining our lost market share, which declined from 12.8 percent to 9.1 percent since 2015, would generate 127 million additional visitors over the next decade, resulting in \$478 billion in additional spending with U.S. businesses, 140,000 new American jobs, and generate \$55 billion in tax revenue.

But we should aim higher. And the opportunity is right on our doorstep.

Over the next 4 years, America is set to host several premier events—including the 2025 Ryder Cup, America's 250th birthday, the 2026 FIFA World Cup, and the 2028 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games.

With Presidential leadership and the right policies in place, these events can welcome 40 million international visitors and drive \$95 billion in economic activity.

To help seize this opportunity and regain American travel dominance, the U.S. Travel Association established the Commission on Seamless and Secure Travel. Comprised of key leaders across the private and public sectors, the commission spent nearly a year gathering evidence, studying the latest security technologies, and learning how progress is being made both at home and abroad.

The commission's report offers a guide for the Trump administration and Congress to fulfill President Trump's pledge to usher in a Golden Age of Travel. Based on the commission's work, U.S. Travel recommends that Congress and the Trump administration take 4 crucial steps to make America the top travel destination:

1

*Establish White House leadership to showcase America at premier events.*—In the first 100 days, the Trump administration should establish an interagency task force, chaired by a senior White House official, to bring sustained leadership and focus across the Federal Government to take advantage of global events coming our way over the next 4 years. The administration should leverage Brand USA, a public-private partnership, to market America's destinations to the world and increase international visitation for these events.

2

*Deliver on President Trump's promise to efficiently and securely process visas for the 2026 FIFA World Cup.*

- *Provide full-strength consular staffing for visa processing.*—Fully staff visa processing windows during all available business hours and surge staff to remotely process visa applications.
- *Extend visa validity for vetted, lawful visitors.*—Extend B-1/B-2 visa validity for 2 years for lawful visa holders who have never been refused a visa, have previously visited the United States, left the country on time, and have no immigration or criminal violations.
- *Establish a National Vetting Service that builds on President Trump's National Vetting Center.*—Rather than relying on entry-level foreign service bureaucrats to conduct visa processing, seek legislation to establish a new National Vetting Service (NVS) dedicated to visa processing and traveler vetting. The NVS would be a professional national security workforce that is fully funded through visa fees, separate from the Foreign Service, and could be surged anywhere in the world to efficiently handle visa processing demand.
- *Create a "Secure Travel Partnership" program to increase countries that have strong travel security agreements with the United States.*—Establish a Secure Travel Partnership program where countries could qualify for visa facilitation benefits by meeting all security requirements of the Visa Waiver Program (VWP) and keeping refusal rates below 12 percent and overstay rates below 5 percent. In return, highly qualified first-time B-1/B-2 visa applicants from Partnership countries could have in-person interviews and biometric collection done by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) upon arrival at U.S. airports, rather than by appointment at U.S. consulates and embassies.

*Create the world's most advanced and secure airport screening process.*—Deploy state-of-the-art screening technology that strengthens security AND reduces wait times by allowing all travelers to carry water bottles and larger liquids, leave all electronics in their bags and keep their shoes, jackets, and belts on.

- *Make a historic investment in security technology.*—Immediately end the diversion of the Passenger Security Fee and increase technology funding to generate \$10 billion to modernize the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and put new identity verification, on-person screening and baggage scanning technology in every U.S. airport lane within 5 years.

*Create strong, modern and efficient airport borders to keep America safe and global travel moving.*

- *Provide full-strength staffing at airport customs.*—Fund an additional 2,000 CBP officers to fully staff U.S. airports of entry. Surge CBP staffing to the National Targeting Center, National Vetting Center, and Global Entry processing to maximize security while facilitating record travel.
- *End hours-long customs wait times for Americans returning home from abroad.*—Expand CBP's Enhanced Passenger Processing (EPP) and Seamless Border Entry (SBE) to the top 25 airports by the end of 2026. EPP allows low-risk U.S. citizens to forgo customs interviews if they pass pre-arrival vetting, have their identities biometrically confirmed, and have nothing to declare. SBE uses advanced biometric technology to confirm the identities of Global Entry travelers on the move, without the need to stop at a kiosk.
- *Strengthen protection against immigration overstays.*—Invest \$600 million to complete CBP's biometric air exit system within 2 years and enhance the Traveler Verification Service (TVS) that is used to identify travelers entering and exiting the United States.

Implementing these recommendations will strengthen our economy, create jobs across the country, and improve our trade balance while ensuring America remains a secure and welcoming destination for international travelers. We need a new strategy to secure America's global travel leadership.

To learn how modernizing our travel systems will deliver a world-class experience for both domestic and international travelers, visit [ShowcaseAmericanTravel.org](http://ShowcaseAmericanTravel.org).

Mr. GIMENEZ. Thank you, Mr. Freeman.

Now I recognize Mr. Gruen for 5 minutes to summarize his opening statement.

#### **STATEMENT OF JON GRUEN, CHAIRMAN AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, FORTEM TECHNOLOGIES**

Mr. GRUEN. Good morning, Chairman Gimenez, Ranking Member McIver, and honorable Members of the Transportation and Maritime Security Subcommittee.

My name is Jon Gruen, and I am the chief executive officer of Fortem Technologies. I'm grateful for the opportunity to testify today on the security of upcoming international events.

Fortem was founded in 2016 to develop and produce the technology needed to defeat drones. We have become a global leader in drone detection and mitigation, focused on systems that can operate safely in the populated areas and in the national air space.

Our technology is currently deployed by CBP at the Southern Border, on U.S. military bases, and at critical infrastructure sites worldwide.

Fortem also provided counter-drone solutions to the 2020 Olympic games in Tokyo, the 2022 World Cup games in Qatar, and the recent inauguration of President Trump here in the District of Columbia.

Over the next decade, the United States will host multiple major international sporting events. As we approach these global events,

it is vital that we assess today's threat landscape and act now to lower the risk of incidents.

As you are well aware, the occurrence of drone threats has surged in recent years, with the Department of Defense and Homeland Security reporting thousands of unauthorized drone incidents annually. Recent domestic drone incidents, like the collision with the firefighting aircraft in Los Angeles and one that halted an NFL playoff game are warnings of what is to come if we don't act.

Another example includes the incursion that occurred over Joint Base Langley-Eustis in 2023, which triggered a month-long inter-agency attempt to deploy counter-drone assets to no avail. In this incident, standard detection and defeat systems failed, offering no advanced warning of incoming drones or a means to defeat what should have been considered a clear and present danger. This event highlighted a new category of threats we are facing: dark drones, aircraft designed to evade detection by not emitting RF signals.

To protect sensitive sites and large public gatherings, dark drone detection and kinetic mitigation must be the core of any successful counter-drone system.

Thankfully, we do have the technology to defeat rogue drones before they cause harm. Companies like mine have developed AI-powered sensors necessary to identify the threats, including dark drones, as well as autonomous interceptor drones capable of safely taking down the threats. Our system intercepts drones with an aerial net capture system and tows them to predetermined locations, ensuring the safety of bystanders and allowing for forensics on the captured drone.

As I mentioned, this technology has protected spectators at the World Cup, Olympics, and other significant events before. We must field these defensive solutions at scale in the homeland now, as time is a critical aspect in fielding an effective counter-drone system. Based on our experience, counter-drone systems must start to be deployed 12 months before the event, to allow time for system delivery, site analysis, and operational training.

With the 2026 World Cup just over a year away, Federal agencies must be given the tools and authorities they need, and local law enforcement must be empowered to respond to drone threats quickly and effectively.

Currently, counter-drone authorities are spread across multiple agencies, with delayed abilities to mitigate known threats. In the instance a drone is detected and determined to be a danger, authorized Federal personnel must be present and still request explicit clearance to take mitigation action.

The chaos that ensued when drone activity disrupted flights at Newark airport last year is a glaring example of our inability to respond to drone threats in real time. I commend this committee's thoughtful bipartisan work to resolve this challenge through H.R. 8610 last year and believe this bill should be passed swiftly in the new Congress. We need centralized, streamlined counter-drone processes now. We must delegate mitigation authority to State and local law enforcement. Their involvement is critical for faster response and better security at a 12-plus city event like the World Cup, where Federal resources will be stretched thin.

I thank you. I look forward to answering your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Gruen follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF JON GRUEN

APRIL 8, 2025

Good morning, Chairman Gimenez, Ranking Member McIver, and honorable Members of the Transportation and Maritime Security Subcommittee. My name is Jon Gruen, and I am the chief executive officer of Fortem Technologies. I'm grateful for the opportunity to testify today on the timely issue of security in upcoming international events in the United States.

Fortem was founded in 2016 with the explicit intention of developing and producing the technology necessary to defeat a key threat that we saw on the horizon: drones. Nine years later, we have grown to be a global leader in drone detection and kinetic mitigation capabilities, specializing in low-collateral effect systems that can operate safely in populated areas and in the National air space. This unique specialty has garnered attention from Government agencies and private stakeholders alike, and we are currently deployed at military bases both in the homeland and abroad, with CBP at the Southern Border, and with dozens of partners across the globe in critical infrastructure and public-event security.

Over the next decade, the United States will host the 2026 Men's World Cup, the 2028 Summer Olympics, the 2031 Women's World Cup, the 2031 Rugby World Cup, and the 2034 Winter Olympics. These are in addition to our regularly-held domestic sporting events that frequently surpass 100,000 patrons in attendance.

As we approach these large events in the United States, all of which will have a significant international presence, it is incredibly important to do what this committee is discussing today: analyze what the state of security threats will be to the public and participants at the time of those events, and what should be done now to lower the risk of a security incident.

I started gaining experience in securing large international events as the U.S. Special Operations Command lead to the inter-agency Task Force for the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens. At the time, the largest deployment of U.S. inter-agency personnel ever. My recent experiences are based on my company's work providing air space awareness and counter-drone solutions to the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo, the 2022 World Cup Games in Qatar, and the recent inauguration of President Trump right here on Capitol Hill.

There are numerous potential threats to large public events, but law enforcement and security personnel have developed capabilities to mitigate most of them. However, there is one threat which evolves every day, and has proliferated at such a fast pace, that law enforcement does not have the tools to mitigate it. Drones are the new weapon of choice for bad actors around the world, posing an escalating threat to security. Public venues and critical infrastructure, such as airports and energy sites, are equally vulnerable to what might be the greatest asymmetric advantage ever achieved by people intent on death and damage.

As you are well aware, the occurrence of drone threats against critical infrastructure has surged by over 400 percent in the past 5 years, with the Department of Defense and Homeland Security reporting thousands of unauthorized drone incidents annually, posing escalating risks to national security. The effectiveness of these drones to cause catastrophic damage is also growing, as displayed in real-time on the battlefields of Ukraine where the development time line for new drone technologies and tactics is 60 days.

Recent domestic incidents, such as a drone collision with a firefighting aircraft in Los Angeles and a rogue drone that shut down the Steelers-Ravens NFL Playoff game, will happen again at coming attractions if we don't act now. Even larger incidents, such as at Joint Base Langley-Eustis on December 6, 2023, resulted in a near-month-long inter-agency response to deploy counter-drone assets, technology and personnel, all to no avail. Months later a similar incident over a key critical infrastructure site took place in the Pacific Northwest, where law enforcement personnel observed multiple drones flying at consistent intervals for more than a week. In both incidents, traditional drone detect-and-defeat solutions did not work. There was no advanced warning of incoming drones and no countermeasure to defeat what should be considered a clear and present danger.

These incidents have led to the broad acceptance that traditional drone countermeasures are no longer sufficient to protect against what was once thought to be a future threat—dark drones, or drones specifically designed to not emit RF signatures and thereby evade traditional drone detection solutions. In order to adequately protect any sensitive site or large public gathering today, dark drone detection and kinetic mitigation must be the core of any successful counter-drone system.

Thankfully, we do have the technology to detect, track, and neutralize rogue drones before they cause harm. Companies like mine have developed AI-powered sensors necessary to identify the threats, including dark drones, as well as autonomous interceptor drones capable of taking down threats in real-time without collateral damage. Our system intercepts drones with aerial net capture, and then tows them to a pre-determined location, ensuring the safety of bystanders and allowing for forensics on the captured drone. As I mentioned before, this technology has protected spectators at the World Cup, Olympics, the Inauguration and other significant international events. We must field these defensive solutions at scale in the homeland now, as time is a critical aspect in fielding an effective counter-drone system.

Based on our experience, counter-drone systems must start to be deployed 12 months before the event. During that time, there needs to be analysis of site-specific layered solutions; hardware must be purchased, delivered, and integrated; teams identified and trained on this new technology; concepts of operations developed; and small hardware and software modifications made to maximize the effectiveness of those operations.

With the 2026 World Cup just over a year away, we must act quickly to enable relevant Federal agencies to procure and deploy these assets as fast as possible and ensure that these agencies and their local law enforcement partners have the authority to act quickly in response to a threat. In a drone attack, seconds count: giving law enforcement personnel on the ground the ability to do their jobs is just common sense.

Currently, the responsibility of countering the threat of drones is spread across multiple agencies with limited authority to counter drone threats in real time. In the instance a drone is detected and determined to be a threat, authorized Federal personnel must be present and still request explicit clearance in order to take mitigative action. These barriers prevent even well-prepared organizations, such as owners of stadiums or energy sites, from taking proactive action, and point to a larger systemic challenge that extends beyond large events like the World Cup. The chaos that ensued when unauthorized drone activity disrupted flights at Newark International Airport is a glaring example of our inability to detect and respond in real time.

Long-term resolution to the authorities' challenge has been a topic of debate in Congress for some time, and I am grateful for the thoughtful bipartisan legislation from this committee's work on H.R. 8610 last year. However, these upcoming events require centralized and streamlined counter-drone processes as soon as possible to ensure their security. In addition, there needs to be delegation of authorities to more State and local law enforcement, even if it is temporary authorization for these events. Their involvement will enable greater flexibility, faster responses, and better security at a 12+ city event like the World Cup where there may not be enough Federal personnel or assets to deploy. Empowering State and local law enforcement to defend high-risk locations from unauthorized drones will be critical to success.

We have been lucky that many recent drone incidents were not catastrophic, but luck is not a security strategy. The threat is real, but the solution is within reach. I urge Congress to provide Federal agencies with the resources necessary to procure capable counter-drone systems as soon as possible, and to make sure that Federal, State, and local law enforcement are granted the appropriate authorities needed to protect these high-visibility events. I'm grateful for the opportunity to testify today, and look forward to engaging with all of you on this topic.

Mr. GIMENEZ. Thank you, Mr. Gruen.

I now recognize Dr. Kelley for 5 minutes to summarize his opening statement.

**STATEMENT OF EVERETT B. KELLEY, PH.D., NATIONAL PRESIDENT, AMERICAN FEDERATION OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES (AFGE)**

Mr. KELLEY. Chairman Gimenez, Ranking Member McIver, Chairman Green, Ranking Member Thompson, and Members of the subcommittee, my name is Everett Kelley. I am the national president of the American Federation of Government Employees, AFGE. On behalf of the over 820,000 Federal and D.C. Government workers represented by my union, including more than 47,000 transpor-

tation security officers, I appreciate the opportunity to testify today.

The decision by the Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem to unilaterally rescind the 2024 collective bargaining agreement between AFGE and the Transportation Security Administration has created an unprecedented crisis for TSOs at a time when our Nation's aviation security system is facing increasing demands.

This decision undermines work force stability and aviation security as we prepare for significant international events like America's 250th birthday next year and the summer Olympic games in 2028.

Since 2011, AFGE has worked with TSA to establish a framework for genuine collective bargaining that balances aviation security needs with workers' rights. Our agreement has strengthened workplace policies while maintaining TSA's operational flexibilities.

The 2024 CBA marked a significant milestone, providing long-term stability and predictable working conditions for TSOs while supporting TSA's mission.

The abrupt termination of this agreement by Secretary Noem has dismantled years of progress. This action has left over 47,000 TSOs vulnerable to arbitrary management decisions, undermining morale, and creating instability within the TSA's work force.

Secretary Noem's decision to rescind our CBA has created immediate uncertainty for TSOs, who rely on this protection for predictable working conditions. Without established procedures for shift bidding, leave approval, or grievance resolution, TSOs face arbitrary decisions that undermine morale and job satisfaction. This instability will lead to higher turnover rates, a direct threat to aviation security and experienced officers leave their post.

The timing could not be worse. Major interaction in international events will significantly increase traveler volumes in the coming years, regarding a fully-staffed and motivated work force operating under standardized procedures. Workforce instability threatens screening consistencies and efficiency during these critical periods when heightened security vigilance is essential.

To address this crisis, Congress must take immediate action. And this is an ask. First, AFGE urges Congress to pass legislation to codify collective bargaining rights for TSOs. AFGE strongly supports the right—for the TSA Workforce Act, H.R. 2086, introduced by Ranking Member Bennie Thompson. This bipartisan legislation will provide permanence to TSOs' labor rights under title 5 of the U.S. Code, ensuring fair agreement procedures and Merit System Protection Board appeal rights. Congress needs to prioritize this legislation.

Second, AFGE asks Congress to restore our rescinded collective bargaining agreement. Congress needs to pass legislation mandating the reinstatement of 2024 CBA immediately to restore stability to the TSA work force.

Finally, Congress needs to utilize the oversight authority. Congress must investigate Secretary Noem's decisions through public hearings that examine its legal basis and factual justification. DHS officials should be required to provide evidence supporting the claim against AFGE while explaining how this actually aligns with national security priorities.

The decision to rescind the 2024 collective bargaining agreement represents an unprecedented attack on workers' rights that threatens aviation security at a critical time for our Nation. TSO performs vital functions in protecting America's transportation system. They deserve dignity, respect, and fair working conditions provided to bind the agreements negotiated on their behalf.

AFGE remains committed to fighting for TSOs' rights while working with Congress to find solutions that balance labor protections with aviation security needs.

So thank you for holding this hearing today. I look forward to answering any questions that you might have. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Kelley follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF EVERETT B. KELLEY

APRIL 8, 2025

Chairman Gimenez, Ranking Member McIver, Chairman Green, Ranking Member Thompson, and Members of the Homeland Security Committee: My name is Everett B. Kelley and I am the national president of the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), AFL-CIO. On behalf of the over 820,000 Federal and District of Columbia workers represented by our union, including over 47,000 Transportation Security Officers (TSOs) as of February 26, I appreciate the opportunity to offer testimony at today's hearing before the Subcommittee on Transportation and Maritime Security, "America on the Global Stage: Examining Efforts to Secure and Improve the U.S. Travel System for Significant International Events." The recent unilateral rescission of the collective bargaining agreement between AFGE and the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has created an unprecedented crisis for the TSO workforce at a time when our Nation's transportation security system faces increasing challenges. This decision not only violates the Administrative Procedure Act and is a clear form of retaliation in violation of the First Amendment, but also threatens to undermine our aviation security and the recovery of America's travel economy, as we prepare for significant international events, including America's 250th birthday, the 2026 FIFA World Cup and the 2028 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games.

#### BACKGROUND

For over 20 years, AFGE has represented TSOs at airports nationwide, with union membership remaining completely voluntary throughout this period. Following the establishment of the Transportation Security Administration after September 11, 2001, a framework for collective bargaining gradually evolved to balance the needs of management and the workforce. In February 2011, after careful consideration of TSA's mission requirements and consultation with stakeholders, then-Administrator John Pistole established a framework for "genuine, binding collective bargaining" for TSOs, recognizing that labor rights could be compatible with the agency's mission. This decision came after thoughtful evaluation of workforce data and listening to the perspectives of TSOs, Federal security directors, management, and union representatives to ensure that collective bargaining would support rather than hinder TSA's mission. This milestone represented a significant recognition that respecting workers' rights and ensuring transportation security are complementary, not contradictory goals.

In June 2011, TSOs elected AFGE as their exclusive representative, establishing a labor-management relationship that would endure across multiple administrations, both Democratic and Republican. Our first collective bargaining agreement, signed in November 2012, established new award programs for employees, improved processes for bidding on shifts and leave, and created new policies governing uniforms that balanced professional requirements with officer comfort and practicality. Subsequent agreements in 2016 and 2020 built upon these foundations, gradually expanding the scope of bargaining while maintaining TSA's operational flexibility. In December 2022, Administrator David P. Pekoske further extended bargaining rights to more closely align with standard Federal-sector labor relations "to the same extent as permitted under Chapter 71 of Title 5," reflecting the agency's growing recognition of the value of meaningful collective bargaining. This evolution demonstrated that collective bargaining at TSA could mature and strengthen across dif-



ferent administrations, proving that labor rights and government excellence are not mutually exclusive.

#### THE 2024 COLLECTIVE BARGAINING AGREEMENT AND ITS ABRUPT TERMINATION

The 2024 Collective Bargaining Agreement, which became effective on May 24, 2024, represented the culmination of years of evolving labor relations at TSA and was structured with a 7-year term to provide long-term stability for both the workforce and the agency. This agreement represented significant advancements in addressing workplace concerns while ensuring TSA maintained the flexibility needed to fulfill its security mission. The contract included provisions for fair shift assignments, transparent leave policies, objective performance evaluation standards, and equitable disciplinary procedures—all fundamental elements of a productive and stable workplace. The agreement's 7-year duration reflected confidence in the maturity of the labor-management relationship and a commitment to stability and predictability in working conditions for the TSO workforce. Additionally, the agreement permitted limited mid-term bargaining to address emerging issues, creating a flexible framework that could adapt to changing mission needs while preserving essential worker protections.

On February 27, 2025, without warning or consultation, Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem signed a memorandum that specifically targeted AFGE by name and unilaterally rescinded the 2024 collective bargaining agreement. The memorandum made unsupported allegations that AFGE was harming TSOs and declared the 9-month-old agreement non-binding and rescinded without any factual justification. Secretary Noem's directive went beyond merely terminating the contract—it revoked AFGE's status as the exclusive representative of TSOs, eliminated all collective bargaining rights and obligations, and stripped AFGE of all rights as the union representing TSO's. Approximately 1 week later, TSA informed AFGE of this decision and simultaneously announced it publicly, making demonstrably false claims about AFGE's use of official time and baselessly asserting that our union "did not represent or protect" its members' interests. This extraordinary action came with no identified breach of contract or change in circumstances that could justify such a drastic measure, raising serious concerns about its true motivations.

#### IMPACT ON TRANSPORTATION SECURITY AND WORKFORCE STABILITY

The rescission of the 2024 CBA has created immediate uncertainty for over 47,000 TSOs who relied on its protections for basic workplace fairness and predictability. Without established procedures for shift bidding, leave approval, and performance evaluation, TSOs now face arbitrary and unpredictable working conditions that undermine morale and job satisfaction at a time when their focus should be entirely on security operations. The elimination of negotiated grievance procedures has removed an essential mechanism for resolving workplace disputes fairly and efficiently, leaving TSOs vulnerable to potentially arbitrary management decisions without recourse. These conditions will create unnecessary stress and anxiety among the workforce, leading to decreased job satisfaction and ultimately higher turnover rates among the TSO workforce. There is currently a very high level of anxiety within the TSO workforce and many TSOs are fearful they will be targeted for being an AFGE member or an officer for their local. The potential loss of experienced TSOs represents a direct threat to our aviation security capabilities, as these officers possess invaluable institutional knowledge and screening expertise that cannot be quickly replaced by new TSOs or machines.

#### CONSEQUENCES FOR AVIATION SECURITY AND GLOBAL EVENTS

The timing of this disruption could not be more concerning as the United States prepares to host in several major international events in the coming years, including the 2025 Ryder Cup, America's 250th birthday, the 2026 FIFA World Cup, and the 2028 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games, that will significantly increase demands on our aviation security system.

The anticipated surge in international travelers will require a fully staffed, experienced, and motivated TSO workforce operating at maximum effectiveness to ensure security while managing increased passenger volumes. Workforce instability resulting from the CBA rescission threatens to compromise screening consistency and thoroughness during this critical period when heightened security vigilance is essential for both safety and America's global reputation as a premier destination for international travelers. The elimination of established work rules introduces unnecessary operational variability at a time when standardization and predictability are most needed to handle increased passenger volumes efficiently while maintaining rigorous security standards. This disruption to labor relations and wanton display

of disrespect to the workforce at TSA represents a self-inflicted wound to our Nation's transportation security readiness at a time when we can least afford it.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONGRESSIONAL ACTION

Congress must consider legislative action to clarify and strengthen the collective bargaining rights of Transportation Security Officers to prevent similar unilateral actions in the future. AFGE greatly appreciates Ranking Member Thompson and Ranking Member McIver for reintroducing the Rights for the TSA Workforce Act (H.R. 2086) on March 11. This legislation, when enacted into law, will provide permanence and predictability of the statutory rights and protections of title 5 of the U.S. Code, the fairness of negotiated grievance and arbitration provisions, and U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board appeal rights that are currently lacking in the work lives of the TSO workforce. The Rights for the TSA Workforce Act is bipartisan legislation, supported by both Republicans and Democrats. AFGE urges the Homeland Security Committee to consider this legislation as soon as possible.

In addition, Congress needs to pass legislation that would reinstate TSOs' collective bargaining agreement immediately. Ranking Member Thompson and Ranking Member McIver offered legislation as an amendment to the Full-Year Continuing Appropriations and Extensions Act (H.R. 1968) last month that would prevent funds being made available unless the Department of Homeland Security rescinds the February 27 publication "Supporting the TSA Workforce by Removing a Union That Harms Transportation Security Officers" and replace it with the 2024 collective bargaining agreement that TSA made with AFGE. AFGE thanks Ranking Member Thompson and Ranking Member McIver for their leadership and urges Congress to take up this legislation immediately to reinstate TSOs' collective bargaining agreement and make clear that Congress stands with America's public service officers and ensuring there are no negative impacts to aviation security.

Furthermore, AFGE urges Congress to immediately exercise its oversight authority to examine the legal basis and factual justifications for Secretary Noem's decision to rescind the 2024 CBA. This investigation should include public hearings where TSA and DHS officials explain the timing, rationale, and legal authority for this unprecedented action against a binding contract. The oversight process should also examine the specific allegations made against AFGE in Secretary Noem's memorandum and the public announcement, requiring DHS to provide evidence to support claims that our union was harming TSOs or failing to represent their interests. These oversight activities are essential to ensure transparency and accountability for a decision impacting both aviation security and the rights of over 47,000 Federal employees.

#### CONCLUSION

The rescission of the 2024 Collective Bargaining Agreement represents an unprecedented attack on the rights of Transportation Security Officers and threatens to undermine aviation security at a critical time for our Nation. The men and women who serve as TSOs perform vital functions in protecting our Nation's transportation systems from threats and deserve to be treated with dignity and respect, including by honoring binding workplace agreements negotiated on their behalf. AFGE remains committed to fighting for the rights of TSOs through all available legal and legislative means and stands ready to work with Congress to find solutions that respect workers' rights while ensuring effective transportation security. As Congress examines efforts to secure and improve the U.S. travel system and prepare for significant international events, addressing this urgent issue needs to be a priority. The stability and effectiveness of our Nation's transportation security system depend on a motivated, experienced workforce operating under fair and predictable conditions of employment—conditions that were provided by the very agreement that has been unlawfully rescinded.

Thank you for holding today's hearing and for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the TSO workforce represented by AFGE. I am prepared to answer any questions the subcommittee may have.

Mr. GIMENEZ. Thank you, Dr. Kelley.

Members will be recognized in the order of seniority for their 5 minutes of questions.

I recognize myself for 5 minutes of questioning.

Mr. Freeman, have we ever reached—I know that we had the pandemic, and then what was the highest year that we had international passengers in the United States?

Mr. FREEMAN. The highest year for international travel was 2018. We have gone down or remained below that every year since. We, at the end of last year, were only at about 90 percent of where we were prepandemic. So the United States continues to struggle to welcome international visitors in the numbers we previously did.

Coming into this year, visa concerns, Customs concerns were top reasons for that. We can't ignore the strength of the dollar. We can't ignore our economy versus others coming into this year, but the issues that were within our control were 500-day-plus wait times to get an interview for a visa, multi-hour waits to get through Customs. Both of those were big deterrents for foreign travelers.

Mr. GIMENEZ. Was that a reality before the Trump administration, or has that just happened in the last 60 days?

Mr. FREEMAN. We've ebbed and flowed in terms of where we are on visa wait times. The lowest we have ever been was during the Obama administration where consuls around the world processed visas at 2 weeks or less. That has ebbed and flowed ever since. There were successes.

During the Trump turn, there were more struggles coming out of the pandemic. We have really struggled to get the consular officials we need around the world and to get these visa wait times down.

Mr. GIMENEZ. How do we end up with wait times of 2 weeks to 500 days? How did that happen?

Mr. FREEMAN. When you look at what happened post-pandemic or in the early days of the pandemic, all these Foreign Service officers came back home. They were slow to get back out to their consuls around the world. Processing visas is also the lowest rung on the totem pole of jobs within the Foreign Service officer community. It is not the most desired job out there. That is why we recommended an alternative approach to doing this. If we want to get all wait times down to 30 days or less, which is something the United States of America should aspire to do, we need to take a new look at how we do this. These fees that foreign travelers pay can cover the cost of creating a new service that processes travelers. There is no need for Foreign Service officers to do this. There is a better way to do it.

We think we could also use kind-of emergency SWAT teams. Whenever wait times get high, we could send these officers or these officials into jurisdictions where they get high. The United States could be the most secure Nation in the world and also the most efficient when it comes to processing travelers.

Mr. GIMENEZ. But we lack the technology, and we lack the manpower, and we have lacked the manpower and technology for some time in order to do that—also probably policy, right?

Mr. FREEMAN. I'm sorry?

Mr. GIMENEZ. Policy.

Mr. FREEMAN. Manpower has been an enormous issue. Technology is an even bigger issue. I think the will to get it done is the largest issue, right? Where is the goal? We don't have a goal when it comes to processing visas. At the end of the Biden administration, they established the goal of 90 days or less. If we achieved

that goal, we would have still been last in the world when it comes to processing visas.

Mr. GIMENEZ. This was at the end of the Biden administration?

Mr. FREEMAN. The—November of the Biden administration. We need to have greater aspirations when it comes to how we welcome travelers into this country. They want to do nothing more than come here, spend their money, and go home and tell their family and friends what a great time they had.

Mr. GIMENEZ. So the Biden administration was, in close to 4 years, basically right at the end of his administration he decided, well, maybe we have a 90-day period versus the 500-day period that some these visas have taken.

Mr. FREEMAN. There is no doubt that the wait times peaked coming out of COVID. There were steps taken. It was a little too little too late. We are hopeful we can find bipartisan support to be more efficient in the future.

Mr. GIMENEZ. By the way, I agree that the passenger security fee, that has been diverted for a number of years, needs to be fully invested in TSA. I don't believe—you're going to be paying for something, you are saying, "I am paying a passenger security fee, it should be for passenger security." That's a novel concept I think here in the Federal Government. I think that that can be said for administrations on both sides of the aisle.

So I would hope—I know that one of my colleagues, Nick LaLota, had a bill to make sure that the passenger fee went to technology, et cetera, that we need at TSA. I certainly support that. I think we need to do more of that. The fact that we're not going to be upgrading our system to the middle of 2040's, that's totally unacceptable.

Mr. Gruen, in terms of drones—and I only have about 30 seconds left—I found it interesting that you said that, even if you put your technology, say, at all these stadiums, et cetera, to protect, that it would take a Federal individual to say, "Go ahead and knock that drone out of the sky," that the local law enforcement could not make that call on its own or protect its own citizens.

Mr. GRUEN. Correct. The local law enforcement, State and local, do not have the current authorities. Even Federal had it only authorized in temporary durations and only certain agencies.

Mr. GIMENEZ. Fair enough. OK. Maybe I'll come back to a second round.

With that, I yield back. Now I recognize the Ranking Member, the gentlewoman from New Jersey.

Mrs. MCIVER. Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman.

For many years, we all know that TSA experienced very high attrition rates among its front-line officers. AFGE worked for many years to advocate for better pay for TSOs to put them on the same pay scale as other Federal workers and help address attrition.

In 2023, when pay raises for TSOs finally went into effect, TSA's attrition rate dropped nearly half.

President Kelley, with the Trump administration now trying to bust TSOs union, do you expect attrition rates to rise again? How would higher attrition rates affect the security of commercial travel, as well as wait times at checkpoints?

Mr. KELLEY. Thank you for the question. I certainly think that it will affect attrition rates because, as we all know, that attrition

rate went down more than half because there was a CBA, because there was adequate pay, because there was some rights for these employees on the job. They felt very secure. The morale was up. But now that they don't have a CBA, it was certainly—I expect the attrition rate to go back to where it was or maybe even lower, because they don't have any protection. They don't have any—morale seems to be going down. As I travel the airports and talk to various wards, you know, we all see that. So I think that you will see it go completely south.

I think that wait time will be the result of this attrition rate going back because you're talking about now employee burnout, you know, and all these types of things that's going to happen that's going to affect wait time.

Mrs. MCIVER. Thank you.

Mr. Freeman, earlier this year, the press reported on a document listing options House Republicans are considering including in their reconciliation bill. The document included proposals for increasing the passenger security fee passengers pay on each airline ticket and extending the diversion of fee collections away from TSA's budget to help fund tax cuts. What is the U.S. Travel Association's position on extending fee diversions away from TSA's budget?

Mr. FREEMAN. TSA plays a critical role in the travel process. We value our partnership with TSA. We believe that TSA needs to better balance its funding between technology and staffing. To do that, it needs to maintain all of the resources that it achieves through the transportation security fee. As the Chairman said, none of that money should be diverted. It is a violation of every traveler that is out there who is expecting the contributions they are making when they buy that airline ticket to be supportive of the travel process. How we do that through both technology and staffing is a critical question.

Mrs. MCIVER. Thank you for that.

In my opening statement, I talked about the decrease in visitation from Canadians. You talked a little bit about just the decrease and the differences in between travel currently right now. How will these reductions in Canadian visitors to the United States impact the travel industry and economy in your opinion?

Mr. FREEMAN. If indeed we have a decline in Canadian visitation, it will be significant in terms of the effects on our economy. A 10 percent decline in Canadian travelers would cost the market about \$2 billion in spending. Canada is critical to the United States. It's critical that we send the message that we want Canadian visitors to come.

We've seen tensions in the past between nations. That doesn't need to become a part of the travel process. We'd like to see that clear message right now that Canadians, Europeans, all travelers are encouraged to come to the United States. That message could be sent more loudly right now.

Mrs. MCIVER. Thank you, Mr. Freeman.

With that, I yield back.

Mr. GIMENEZ. Thank you.

I now recognize the gentleman from Arizona, Mr. Crane.

Mr. CRANE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

This is a very important hearing today talking about travel into the United States and some of the big events that we have coming up, like the Olympics and the World Cup.

Mr. Freeman, I want to start with you. According to the U.S. Bureau of Transportation Statistics, TSA has either halted data collection or has over-classified information on prohibited items detected and seized by TSA since 2008. My concern is that TSA purposely hasn't collected data or is over classifying data to hide embarrassing statistics that show that they routinely fail what the industry calls covert tests. These tests are an event where an undercover operative from the agency tests security by attempting to smuggle prohibited items through TSA.

In 2015, DHS OIG John Roth issued a scathing report highlighting, under the Obama administration, the OIG found that, 96 percent of instances TSA officers used advanced imaging technology, or AIT, at 8 airports failed to detect hidden threat items. AIT is still in use today at U.S. airports by TSA.

The agency doesn't have any data to suggest that these figures from 2025 have been improved in 2025. I am currently working with the Chairman on drafting a bill that would require TSA to submit the results of all covert testing and/or red-teaming testing to the Committee on Homeland Security, and I hope this bill can be bipartisan.

My question, sir, and please answer briefly, with TSA's covert test failures coupled with the fact that the agency hasn't collected or submitted data on failed covert testing in recent years, how can Congress ensure that TSA is capable of handling incoming travelers from around the world for upcoming events like America's 250th birthday, the 2026 FIFA World Cup, and the 2028 summer Olympics?

Mr. FREEMAN. Thank you, Congressman. TSA's success is critical to all travelers. Travelers need confidence in their safety, in their security, or else they are simply not going to travel. So we share your concern with anything that would suggest that the process is anything but as safe and secure as it could be.

TSA's accountability is to you and to Congress. It is to the traveling public. So we support your efforts to find ways to ensure that the technology and the staffing levels are working in the ways that they need to work.

I will point out that, in recent years, while staffing has increased, spending on staffing has increased, spending on technology has decreased. The technology that is so desperately needed in airports is not slated to get into the airports until the 2040's. We need to be more urgent about providing the best technology and as quickly as we can to TSA to ensure the safety and security of the traveling public.

Mr. CRANE. Were you aware of that statistic that I read you to that, under the Obama administration, OIG found that, in 96 percent, the TSA officers using advanced image technology failed their tests when employees from the TSA tried to smuggle weapons, bombs, knives, guns, et cetera through their security checkpoints?

Mr. FREEMAN. I was not aware of that specific statistic.

Mr. CRANE. What do you think about that, sir?

Mr. FREEMAN. It sounds like every day we have work to do. We have work to do to get better. We have got to make sure we have got the right training; we have got the right technology; we have got the right people in place.

Security, safety, is fundamental to people traveling. If people don't have that confidence, we will see a decline in travel. It is something that is of the upmost importance, and you certainly have our support.

Mr. CRANE. What about you, Mr. Gruen? Were you aware of that?

Mr. GRUEN. I was not aware of that statistic.

Mr. CRANE. What do you think about the fact that they are no longer reporting those numbers?

Mr. GRUEN. Again, oversight and requiring an agency to do their job is essential to good governance.

Mr. CRANE. OK.

Mr. Freeman, during the 2024 Fourth Annual Future of Travel Mobility Conference, you mentioned the need to grasp the opportunity right in front us. We're talking about a decade of sporting events that will make the United States the most sought-after destination; modernizing our TSA and travel processing procedures are included.

My question is—please answer briefly—how should TSA and Congress look at the use of AI for passenger processing to scan faces and directly cross-reference international travelers with criminal databases?

Mr. FREEMAN. It was at that same conference that I interviewed former TSA Administrator Pekoske, who demonstrated tremendous leadership during his time within TSA and partnership with the private sector. I think, based on my experience with Administrator Pekoske, TSA was going down the right road in terms of what it looks at in AI. We see enormous potential. The simple truth is that AI can detect things that the human eye will miss. We see enormous potential in technology.

Mr. CRANE. Thank you. I yield back.

Mr. GIMENEZ. Thank you. I now recognize the Ranking Member of the committee, the gentleman from Mississippi, Mr. Thompson.

Mr. THOMPSON. Thank you so much. I think it's interesting to respond that Trump had nominated Mr. Pekoske to serve as the TSA administrator, and he was allowed a second term, but in the midst of it, he was fired. I think that is unfortunate. He had done a good job. I think he deserved a better departure ramp than what he received. Because, from my vantage point, both Democrats and Republicans saw his vision for moving the agency forward.

The other thing I'd like to say is that TSA and its workers and technology have managed a successful screening effort so that there's been nothing successful up to this point. That doesn't mean things hadn't gotten through; it just hasn't been successful. You can call it luck or whatever.

But we also believe that technology is a force multiplier for security in all of this. There are only so many men and women we can put in airports and do what we do other than that technology can't do a better job.

It's unfortunate that we've had several opportunities to invest in more technology. We've not had the kind of bipartisan support to finance that technology, but we have to do it. I look forward to doing that.

One of the things we are talking about the different events here to this country and in the not-too-distant future.

So, Mr. Freeman, my concern is, is you or your organization aware of what the administration is doing in its screening protocols that are creating this discomfort? Have you seen anything in writing on those protocols or anything?

Mr. FREEMAN. We have had discussions with Customs and Border Protection to understand what policies are in place; what, if any, policies have changed? My understanding is that policies have not changed, but media coverage has certainly increased. We are aware of that. We are aware of the concern that travelers have. We are concerned about anything that would discourage travelers from wanting to visit the United States.

So, just like with Canada, it is clear that we have work to do to get the message out that we seek these travelers. We want them bringing their spending here. We would be concerned about anything that would drive them to take their spending somewhere else.

Mr. THOMPSON. So, with that lack of clarity at this point, it is having an adverse impact on people coming to the United States.

Mr. FREEMAN. There is significant anecdotal evidence. I think we need to see the data. We are still waiting on the data from the Department of Commerce to better understand what is happening. But, again, we are on our toes. We see the concern that is out there. That leaves us obviously communicating to the administration and various agencies the need to provide travelers with the confidence that they desire.

Mr. THOMPSON. Thank you.

President Kelley, can you just describe for the committee the benefits of having a Federalized work force?

Mr. KELLEY. There are so many really when you think about it. No. 1, they have a CBA, and CBA was negotiated by Administrator Pekoske, who was appointed by President Trump. He negotiated CBA that would bring about some stability inside of the work force. Not only that, you know, you are free of any form of striking because, if you had a private contractor, you know, they can—you and I can go on strike any day. The Federal system cannot strike. Do not talk about going on strike. You talk about morale. We've already shown that attrition rate went down about 50 percent, you know? We will continue to see attrition rates go down when you have a unionized Federal work force. You have flexibility.

That's the thing that I like about the contract; it allows so much flexibility for the management to do what they need to do in the event of a crisis. So it is insurmountable the benefits that would be for this TSA.

Mr. THOMPSON. Thank you very much.

TSA, we created after 9/11 because the current protocol for screening virtually didn't exist before that. So it's the new kid on the block. We've been successful in not having, as I indicated, a successful person getting on a plane and causing that kind of crisis,



but it's a work in progress. I mean, with technology still growing, we still have to continue to beat as best we can—our adversaries are constantly trying to figure out how they can beat the system. In reality, it's technology that's going to catch them. So I look forward to continuing this discussion.

I yield back, Mr. Chair.

Mr. GIMENEZ. Thank you, we're going to go through a second round of questioning. I yield myself 5 minutes for questioning.

Mr. Freeman, you talked about the visa process and how we can accelerate that. Could you be a little more specific exactly what you're talking about in order to accelerate the visa process, take it down from 300 days to something a little bit more reasonable?

Mr. FREEMAN. Yes, there are multiple consuls around the world right now. Colombia is the best example of where wait times exceed 500 days to get an interview for a visa. We have had similar wait times in India. In years past, we had wait times like that in Brazil, where they have been successful recently in bringing those wait times down. I think there are several elements to this: No. 1, we simply have to establish a goal as a country. How well do we want to process visas regardless of what the demand may be? Once we establish that goal, what's the technique for getting there?

Our proposal is to move things out of Foreign Service officers, to create a new national vetting service where people apply for that job; they sign up for that job. That's what they want to do. Their job is to process visas. Those employees are paid for by the fees that travelers pay when they apply for visas. There is no additional cost to U.S. taxpayers. The key, though, is having individuals who actually desire to be in this role; it is what they signed up for. You don't get that today. You don't get that because you've got—again, people on the lowest rung of the totem pole. This is a job they don't want to do. In many parts around the world, they are only doing one shift a day. They work from, say, 9 to 3, and the consulate closes. We have also got to get more creative in those situations. There are countries where we only have 4 or 5 consulates for countries as big as the United States. How do we get more creative in terms of how we then process those visas? Where does video conferencing come in? We have all learned the power and the limitations of video conferencing. How can that play a role when it comes to processing visas?

Finally, when we look at the validity period of visas, visas that are good for 6 months or 1 year, is it possible to make those visas good for 2 years? When we have travelers who have come here, abided by our rules, left on time, can we allow, when their visa expires, can we allow rapid recertification of that visa?

There are a number of things that we could follow through if we simply have the will to do it. We establish a goal, and I think this is a bipartisan challenge we've confronted. We just simply haven't had that zeal within the State Department or the leadership on Capitol Hill or in the White House to demand that from the State Department.

Mr. GIMENEZ. If we did that, would you see an increase in travel?

Mr. FREEMAN. Visas, from the 45 percent of our travelers who are required to get a visa, visa access is a bigger concern than the cost of travel. I think that tells us everything we need to know. It

is not the cost of coming to the United States; it is the obstacle to getting the visa that is the biggest deterrent.

Mr. GIMENEZ. Fair enough. Now, in terms of technology—and Representative Crane, you know, brought up a very good statistic. It seems to me that technology has improved in the last 10 years. It has to, right, especially with the advent of artificial intelligence. Is there technology now that will self-identify threats and give cues to the TSA individual on the screen and say, “Hey, you need to look at this, this, this and that,” that will help reduce that 96 percent? Is that technology available now?

Mr. FREEMAN. There is significant technology available now that we’re not using. Now, when you look at elements of the TSA screening process, there is the identify verification; there is the person screening; there is the baggage screening. I think we’ve done very well on the identity verification as we have moved to biometrics. I think we have a lot of work to do when it comes to the baggage and the on-person screening of individuals; that’s where we have the greatest room for growth.

Mr. GIMENEZ. Do you have an estimate of how much that would cost?

Mr. FREEMAN. I believe we have looked at a figure in the neighborhood of—I’m going to use the wrong figure, so I don’t want to mention it. We do have that and are happy to give it to the committee.

Mr. GIMENEZ. OK. So, if we stopped diverting the money, how fast could we implement these new technologies—instead of 2040, which I think is a little bit too far out, 20 years from now, OK? By then, we’ll have something else, OK? So we need to get the technology right. It has to be modular so that, as new technologies come and it gets more and more—gets better, that we need to be able to put that in as quickly as we can, not wait 20 years for that technology to be put in so that, 20 years hence, there’s something else, OK? So how much do you think we are going to need?

Mr. FREEMAN. We believe it’s reasonable that all of these reforms could take place within the next 5 years. This is not something we need to look at decades out. Within the next 5 years, we can give every American traveler the confidence that they can keep their water in their bottle, their belt on their pants, their laptop in their bags.

Mr. GIMENEZ. Fair enough.

I yield back, and I recognize the gentlelady from New Jersey.

Mrs. MCIVER. Thank you, Chairman. I just have one follow-up question, and it’s for Mr. Freeman.

You, during your opening statement, even just now, you talked about the United States and how, you know, if we want to be a global leader in travel, we need to do, you know, X, Y, and Z.

Do you currently consider the United States at the top of the list as a leader in global travel?

Mr. FREEMAN. The United States is the world’s most desired nation to visit. Around the world, this is where travelers want to come.

We commissioned a report through Euromonitor about 18 months ago to rank countries based on their travel facilitation, based on their infrastructure, based on their national leadership. The United

States finished 17th out of 18 countries. Only China finished behind the United States.

You are seeing greater coordination, greater spending, greater zeal in countries like Saudi and other parts of the world that recognize just how important travel is to building their economy, and they also recognize that travel doesn't happen by accident. It takes a heck of a lot of coordination. It takes a heck of a lot of planning to make these things happen.

Every one of us in this room today are travelers. We all know the hassles with the process. We all know the inefficiencies. We all go through this and look at various points and say, "There's got to be a better way to do this." The answer is there is. Do we have any desire to work together to implement those better ways because what we are dealing with today, whether at TSA, at Customs, is not sustainable, and it's not something we should be tolerating.

Mrs. MCIVER. When was this report done?

Mr. FREEMAN. This report was done in—came out early 2024. We're happy to get you a copy of that.

Mrs. MCIVER. Yes. I would love a copy of that.

I just want to thank each of the witnesses for your testimony today and for coming to share with us. I know that this committee hearing is supposed to be about what we are—you know, examining ourselves on a global level to prepare for these big events, but there's just lots going on right now that I think we really need to address before we can talk about like being really prepared, being really, really prepared for all of the big events that we have coming up.

So thank you so much for all of the information that you provided today.

With that, I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. GIMENEZ. I want to thank the Ranking Member.

Now I recognize the gentlelady from South Carolina, Mrs. Biggs.

Mrs. BIGGS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

As the United States gears up to welcome the world for the 2026 FIFA World Cup, and the 2028 Olympic Games, our national travel infrastructure stands at a crucial juncture demanding comprehensive readiness.

The influx of international visitors for these events will place unprecedented demands on our transportation networks and border security.

The recent Executive Order signed by President Trump creating the World Cup task force signifies a critical recognition of the imperative for seamless inner-agency collaboration.

This dedicated task force will be instrumental in strategically preparing our ports of entry, modernizing airport facilities and operations, and fortifying supporting systems, such as Customs and Border Protection, security protocols, and transportation logistics.

So, to Mr. Freeman, how should the World Cup task force prioritize its efforts to address operational challenges at our airports and our ports of entry?

Mr. FREEMAN. Thank you for the question, Congresswoman. I think it's critical, as the World Cup task force gets up and running, that, first, we acknowledge we're already behind the 8 ball. The

World Cup starts in about 15 months. Other countries are already planning, you know, for the 2029 World Cup—I'm sorry. The 2030 World Cup. That planning is already ahead of where we are. So we've got to acknowledge we're already behind the 8 ball.

I have all the faith in the world in the local destinations that are hosting the World Cup. They have been coordinating. They're going to do great—a great job.

The question really becomes in terms of getting people to the games, moving about the United States, and moving into the United States. I think, for the domestic traveler, we're going to see concerns when it comes to moving people through the airports. The demand that we're going to see is basically a Thanksgiving every day for about the 45 days of the World Cup. We all know what it's like traveling on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving; that's what we can expect. It begs the question, what are the things we can do to be more efficient during that period? This task force is critical about aligning the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Transportation, and other relevant agencies to ensure we can meet that demand.

For the foreign travelers coming in, the truth is we're already too late for some of them. I mentioned the wait times for Colombians to get a visa. If they don't have their visa now for the World Cup in 2026, their window is closed. That's shame on us. Right. That's opportunity missed for the United States.

Then we've got to identify, what are the other markets where that window is already closing, and how do we process visas quickly in those markets so we can help those travelers get here?

When we know they're coming, Customs will be the final area where this task force has to work closely with DHS, with other elements of the Government to ensure that we don't have 2-, 3-, 4-hour wait times to get through Miami, to get through LAX, to get through JFK. That is a tremendous concern of ours.

There is nothing more predictable than when a plane is going to land, how many people are on it, and who those people are. So there's no excuse to not be staffed appropriately to move these travelers through, and that's where the task force needs to be focused.

Mrs. BIGGS. Thank you so much for your insight.

My second question, Mr. Gruen, with major international events acting as high-profile targets for bad actors, how do you think the task force should integrate threat intelligence, interagency coordination, and emerging technologies, like counter-UAS and AI-enabled surveillance into the strategic planning?

Mr. GRUEN. Thank you, Congresswoman.

Your second point, technology needs to be procured and deployed now. So we recommend 12 months out from events to really get the technology on the ground, get the personnel trained, and run through different scenarios to mitigate threats.

So we believe the task force needs to do that aspect. Part of that is also going to be authorities, to enable local and State law enforcement to have the authorities to mitigate large threats, such as drones, when they're on the ground.

So, again, prioritizing that—we are behind the power curve on this. We need the task force to prioritize the procurement and de-

ployment of technologies and the training of personnel so that we have adequate protection.

Mrs. BIGGS. Thank you so much.

My time has expired. So I yield back.

Mr. GIMENEZ. Thank you.

I now recognize the gentleman from Arizona, Mr. Crane, for his second round of questioning.

Mr. CRANE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Gruen, I find your testimony and experience very interesting and important to this panel today. You're a former Navy SEAL; is that correct?

Mr. GRUEN. Yes, Congressman.

Mr. CRANE. So you have a lot of background in unconventional warfare?

Mr. GRUEN. I do.

Mr. CRANE. Now you're currently working in the counter-drone space?

Mr. GRUEN. Correct.

Mr. CRANE. Have you spent any time overseas in Ukraine?

Mr. GRUEN. Yes.

Mr. CRANE. Do you feel that Americans and our agencies understand the gravity of what's happening overseas and how it's transforming modern warfare?

Mr. GRUEN. Not at a scale that's necessary. There certainly are pockets of individuals who are aware of the threat and are working diligently to address it. But, as a whole Nation, absolutely not.

Mr. CRANE. Do you believe that the United States is prepared to protect its citizens and infrastructure from drone attacks in some of these major events that we're talking about coming up in the United States?

Mr. GRUEN. Not currently.

Mr. CRANE. Give us an idea of what that could look like, sir.

Mr. GRUEN. There's—the drone threat is so wide-ranging that it is hard to sometimes grasp because you have kind-of the obvious situation of a stadium where you may have DJI-type drones come into the stadium, either drop powders or be explosive in themselves, and do actual physical damage to the attendees.

You also have a lot of other types of operational scenarios. Like airports, with all these folks that are trying to arrive, if you have a drone that goes and parks itself on a runway, the entire operation is going to shut down. It doesn't even have to explode; it can just sit there. You have already disrupted air travel to a level that we have not seen, or we're not prepared for.

Mr. CRANE. Right. It's a lot easier to get some type of explosive into a stadium when a drone doesn't have to go through some magnetometer; is that correct?

Mr. GRUEN. Absolutely.

Mr. CRANE. It's really not that expensive, either, for our enemies to use drone warfare to attack us, is it?

Mr. GRUEN. Absolutely not.

Mr. CRANE. Sir, you said, I believe, in your testimony, that your company has been tasked to do counter-drone operations around key U.S. sites. Can you expound on that a little bit?

Mr. GRUEN. Yes. We are working with the Department of Defense to do some initial base deployments, so both OCONUS and CONUS.

In particular, in response to the New York and New Jersey drone threats at the end of last year, we're at Picatinny Arsenal now with an Army program of record, but we've also deployed to Stewart Air National Guard Base with a coalition of industry partners under NORTHCOM and all to, you know, yield the latest capabilities to really get both at the detection, identification aspect, and then have on-hand mitigation capability, when authorized.

Mr. CRANE. When you guys are doing these operations, are we talking about lone-wolf bad actors? Are we talking about nation-states that you guys are trying to prevent from flying over these sites?

Mr. GRUEN. The scary part about this, Congressman, is we don't have good fidelity on that information. We know that there are drones of various sizes, so ones that cannot be easily procured off of an Amazon or an Alibaba. You have larger drones, and you have drones, multiple drones at a time. So the fact that we don't know who is operating these drones is the real problem.

Mr. CRANE. Are drones being used right now within the United States to conduct espionage?

Mr. GRUEN. Absolutely.

Mr. CRANE. Absolutely. Can you expound on that any more?

Mr. GRUEN. There are briefings from the Government themselves at different classification levels, but we know that there are other nation-states or proxies that are operating near our borders and even, particularly in the homeland, different sites.

Mr. CRANE. Most people probably aren't aware that U.S. Capitol Police are currently using traffic regulation, section 16.2.90, model rockets and boats, to mitigate drone threats on Capitol Grounds. Congress must do its part to properly equip Capitol Police for that reason.

On National Police Week, I plan to introduce the U.S. Capitol Police Empowerment Act of 2025 to authorize the U.S. Capitol Police to mitigate drone threats on the Capitol complex. The bill was drafted with input from the House Admin, Judiciary, Transportation and Infrastructure, and Homeland Security Committees. I'm hoping that everybody will support this bill, as it should be bipartisan.

I do have a video that I would like to play of some of the drone capabilities from your company, Mr. Gruen.

[Video shown.]

Mr. CRANE. Now, Mr. Gruen, are we watching in real time your company's drones being able to shoot out nets and capture enemy drones?

Mr. GRUEN. Correct, Congressman.

Mr. CRANE. Why is that so important, sir?

Mr. GRUEN. We're called the low-collateral effect interceptor inside Government agencies because the way—by catching with a net, we either keep it under a tether and drop it somewhere that's been rendered safe where law enforcement can look at the drone, get forensics, etc. So it's the collateral damage aspect.

You're also not infringing on any publicly identifiable information. It's not hacking a signal. It's not getting personnel—personal information off of anything. So the combination of that, the lack of PII and the low collateral, is what makes it so impactful.

Mr. CRANE. Mr. Chairman, I know my time has expired, but I would like to enter into the record 5 separate articles.

Mr. GIMENEZ. Without objection, so ordered.

Mr. CRANE. I've got, No. 1, U.S. Bureau of Transportation Statistics: Prohibited Items Intercepted at Airport Screening Checkpoints; No. 2, Defense Daily, "TSA's Own Covert Testing Showed Failures, DHS IG Says"; No. 3, ABC News, "TSA fails most tests in latest undercover operation at U.S. airports"; No. 4, "No Drone Zone," United States Capitol Police; and No. 5, a copy of my bill, the U.S. CP Empowerment Act of 2025.

Mr. GIMENEZ. So ordered.

[The information follows:]

## Prohibited Items Intercepted at Airport Screening Checkpoints

[bts.gov/content/prohibited-items-intercepted-airport-screening-checkpoints](https://bts.gov/content/prohibited-items-intercepted-airport-screening-checkpoints)



### Embedded Dataset Excel:

#### Dataset Excel:

[table\\_02\\_16\\_082923.xlsx](#) (25.69 KB)

#### Notes:

The large increase in 2005 and decrease in 2007 was primarily due to the prohibition of lighters on board from April 2005 to August 2007. Fluctuations in counts can be attributed to changes in definitions and regulations governing prohibited items, in addition to the proportion of passengers carrying prohibited items and the intensity of search.

*Other cutting instruments* include scissors, hatchets, swords, sabers, meat cleavers, ice axes, and picks. Effective Dec. 22, 2005, scissors less than 4 inches and tools less than 7 inches were no longer prohibited.

*Knives* include any length and type except round-bladed, butter, and plastic cutlery.

*Clubs* includes martial arts items, baseball bats, night sticks, hammers, pool cues, and billy clubs.



*Firearms* includes any weapon (including a starter gun) that is designed to or may readily be converted to expel a projectile by the action of an explosive, as well as spear guns, BB guns, flare pistols, compressed air guns, and stunning devices.

*Other* refers to tools, self-defense items, compressed gas cylinders, bleach, lighters, and certain sporting goods. Lighters (except for torch lighters and micro torches) were removed from the prohibited items list effective Aug. 4, 2007.

**Description:**

**KEY:** N = data do not exist; R = revised.

<sup>a</sup> All data for 2002, except enplanements, are for April through December.

<sup>b</sup> Data for 2008 are up to Aug. 8, 2008 with the exception of *Firearms and Incendiaries*. TSA has stopped the collection of data on all prohibited items except for *Firearms and Incendiaries* as of Aug. 8, 2008.

<sup>c</sup> TSA has only published *Firearms* data from 2010.

**Source:**

*All data, except enplanements:*

2002-09: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Transportation Security Administration, *Performance Measurement Information System (PMIS)* and personal communication, November 2010.

2009-22: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Transportation Security Administration, Media, available at <https://www.tsa.gov/news/press/releases/2023/01/17/tsa-detected-increase-guns-airport-checkpoints-baltimorewashington#> as of Aug. 18, 2023.

*Enplanements:*

U.S. Department of Transportation, Office of Airline Information, *T-100 Domestic Market Data*, at [https://www.transtats.bts.gov/Data\\_Elements.aspx?Data=1](https://www.transtats.bts.gov/Data_Elements.aspx?Data=1) as of Aug. 18, 2023.

**Publications:**

National Transportation Statistics Table 2-16

2/2

TSA'S OWN COVERT TESTING SHOWED FAILURES, DHS IG SAYS

*defensedaily.com/tsas-own-covert-testing-showed-failures-dhs-ig-says/congress/*

*By Calvin Biesecker, October 8, 2015*

Spectacular failure rates of airport checkpoint security equipment during covert testing by Homeland Security auditors was not a surprise to the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), which operates the screening equipment, because the agency's own internal testing showed similar results, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Inspector General (IG) said on Thursday.

"The recent round of covert testing was not a surprise to us and it was not a surprise to TSA," John Roth told the House Homeland Security Subcommittee on Transportation Security. "We had been doing covert testing over the years with consistently disappointing results . . . And what we found after the covert testing was

even a little more upsetting which was TSA does their own covert testing and those results were very similar to our results.”

The covert testing referred to by Roth was done by his office and showed that in 96 percent of instances Transportation Security Officers using Advanced Imaging Technology (AIT) at eight airports failed to detect hidden threat items. The report is classified but this summer the findings were leaked to some media outlets.

The AIT systems in question are supplied by L-3 Communications [LLL] and are used to screen individuals for metallic and non-metallic threat items that may be hidden beneath their clothing.

Peter Neffenger, the TSA administrator, told the panel that the AIT systems work as designed when used properly.

Roth said that TSA never “elevated the issue” of its own covert test results so that no one else in DHS knew of the problems.

“One of the things we discovered after this round of testing and the very vigorous response that the department gave with regard to our briefing on the covert testing is that no one in DHS had ever known of this issue,” Roth said.

This was a “surprise” to senior DHS leadership, including the secretary and deputy secretary, Roth said.

In a separate hearing last week and again on Thursday to examine follow-up by DHS and TSA to the IG’s report, Roth said that TSA has consistently rejected negative reports coming from the IG’s office over the years.

“One of the conclusions or themes that I can draw from this is that there is a mismatch between risk and meeting the risk,” Roth said of TSA. “And the sort of working theory that we have is that either TSA doesn’t understand the nature of the risk or they do understand the nature of the risk and worse from that, they don’t address the risk in any appropriate way.”

Rep. John Katko (R-N.Y.), Chairman of the subcommittee, said at the outset of the hearing that despite being only 14 years old, TSA has “become bureaucratized.” He added that “Many times TSA has not responded” to negative audit reports “and that leads me to the conclusion that TSA, while a young agency has become a very bureaucratized agency already; too slow to respond and not nimble enough to respond.”

Roth said he’s hopeful that under Neffenger’s leadership that TSA will make the necessary cultural changes to own up to its deficiencies.

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#### TSA FAILS MOST TESTS IN LATEST UNDERCOVER OPERATION AT US AIRPORTS

*abcnews.go.com / US / tsa-fails-tests-latest-undercover-operation-us-airports / story*

*Source said the results were an improvement from 2 years ago.*

*By ABC News, November 9, 2017, 1:10 AM*

In recent undercover tests of multiple airport security checkpoints by the Department of Homeland Security, inspectors said screeners, their equipment or their procedures failed more than half the time, according to a source familiar with the classified report.

When ABC News asked the source if the failure rate was 80 percent, the response was, “You are in the ballpark.”

In a public hearing after a private classified briefing to the House Committee on Homeland Security, Members of Congress called the failures by the Transportation Security Administration disturbing.

Rep. Mike Rogers went as far as to tell TSA Administrator David Pekoske, “This agency that you run is broken badly, and it needs your attention.”

Pekoske was confirmed by the Senate this summer.

Inspectors “identified vulnerabilities with TSA’s screener performance, screening equipment and associated procedures,” according to a statement from the Department of Homeland Security.

The statement added that the findings remain classified but that eight recommendations have been made to the TSA to improve checkpoint security. It is not clear what those recommendations are.

The news of the failure comes 2 years after ABC News reported that secret teams from the DHS found that the TSA failed 95 percent of the time to stop inspectors from smuggling weapons or explosive materials through screening.

That report led to major changes ordered at the TSA by then-Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson. The agency opened a training academy for transportation security officers and changed procedures to reduce long lines.

Although lawmakers described the TSA's performance in this round of testing as poor, it was an improvement from 2 years ago, according to the source familiar with the report.

In the public hearing today on Capitol Hill, members pushed for the full implementation of a program using new scanning equipment that creates a 3-D image of bags, giving screeners better ability to spot possibly dangerous items.

*Are biometric scans the checkpoint of the future?*

The equipment is being tested in TSA checkpoints in at least two airports, but software and installation challenges have slowed wider implementation.

Rep. Bill Keating suggested that money is being diverted from the agency to build President Trump's promised border wall.

"We have the technology and resources to do it, but we're not doing it because . . . we're paying for a wall," Keating said.

He also noted that Viper teams, specially trained Homeland Security units that use canines to secure transportation facilities, are being cut from 31 to 8.

It is not clear when the report will be released publicly.

The TSA said in a statement that it "concurs with the DHS OIG [Office of Inspector General] findings and is committed to aggressively implementing the recommendations."

"We take the OIG's findings very seriously and are implementing measures that will improve screening effectiveness at checkpoints," Pekoske said. "We are focused on staying ahead of a dynamic threat to aviation with continued investment in the workforce, enhanced procedures, and new technologies."

Enter keywords

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## NO DRONE ZONE

The Capitol Police Board has established *Traffic Regulations for the U.S. Capitol Grounds* that detail those activities that are prohibited and rules that are enforced by the U.S. Capitol Police. These regulations provide for the safety of all persons on Capitol Grounds; prevent destruction or damage to Capitol Grounds; preserve healthy and sanitary surroundings; and maintain the Capitol Grounds in an attractive and intact condition for the enjoyment of all visitors.

Chapter 16 of the regulations addresses recreational activities and special restrictions within the U.S. Capitol Grounds.

Specifically, §16.2.90 MODEL ROCKETS and BOATS: strictly prohibits the use of model rockets, remote or manually-controlled model gliders, model airplanes or unmanned aircrafts, model boats and model cars on Capitol Grounds.



### NO DRONE ZONE

In addition, Federal law prohibits flying Unmanned Aircraft Systems, such as drones, anywhere in the District of Columbia, Washington, D.C. and the U.S. Capitol Grounds are designated as a **NO DRONE ZONE**.

Anyone violating Traffic Regulation §16.2.90 will be subject to arrest, a \$300 fine, and/or 90 days imprisonment and may also face additional federal civil and criminal penalties.

## VISITING CAPITOL HILL

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United States Capitol Police  
119 D Street, NE  
Washington, DC 20510  
[USCapitolPolice@uscg.gov](mailto:USCapitolPolice@uscg.gov)

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(Original Signature of Member)

119TH CONGRESS  
1ST SESSION**H. R.** \_\_\_\_\_To authorize the United States Capitol Police to take action with respect  
to threats from unmanned aircraft systems, and for other purposes.

## IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Mr. CRANE introduced the following bill; which was referred to the Committee  
on \_\_\_\_\_**A BILL**To authorize the United States Capitol Police to take action  
with respect to threats from unmanned aircraft systems,  
and for other purposes.1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*  
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4 This Act may be cited as the “USCP Empowerment

5 Act of 2025”.

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2

1 **SEC. 2. AUTHORITY OF UNITED STATES CAPITOL POLICE**  
 2 **WITH RESPECT TO UNMANNED AIRCRAFT**  
 3 **AND UNMANNED AIRCRAFT SYSTEMS.**

4 (a) **AUTHORITY.**—Notwithstanding section 46502 of  
 5 title 49, United States Code, or sections 32, 1030, and  
 6 1367 and chapters 119 and 206 of title 18, United States  
 7 Code, the Capitol Police Board may take, and may author-  
 8 ize personnel in the United States Capitol Police with as-  
 9 signed duties that include the security or protection of  
 10 people, facilities, or assets to take, such actions as are de-  
 11 scribed in subsection (b)(1) that are necessary to mitigate  
 12 a credible threat, as defined by the Capitol Police Board,  
 13 that an unmanned aircraft system poses to the safety or  
 14 security of a covered Capitol Police facility or asset.

15 (b) **ACTIONS DESCRIBED.**—

16 (1) **IN GENERAL.**—The actions authorized in  
 17 subsection (a) are the following:

18 (A) During the operation of the unmanned  
 19 aircraft system, detect, identify, monitor, and  
 20 track the unmanned aircraft system, without  
 21 prior consent, including by means of intercept  
 22 or other access of a wire communication, an  
 23 oral communication, or an electronic commu-  
 24 nication used to control the unmanned aircraft  
 25 system.

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1 (B) Warn the operator of the unmanned  
2 aircraft system, including by passive or active,  
3 and direct or indirect physical, electronic, radio,  
4 and electromagnetic means.

5 (C) Disrupt control of the unmanned air-  
6 craft system, without prior consent, including  
7 by disabling the unmanned aircraft system by  
8 intercepting, interfering, or causing interference  
9 with wire, oral, electronic, or radio communica-  
10 tions used to control the unmanned aircraft sys-  
11 tem.

12 (D) Seize or exercise control of the un-  
13 manned aircraft system.

14 (E) Seize or otherwise confiscate the un-  
15 manned aircraft system.

16 (F) Use reasonable force, if necessary, to  
17 disable, damage, or destroy the unmanned air-  
18 craft system.

19 (2) REQUIRED COORDINATION.—

20 (A) IN GENERAL.—The Capitol Police  
21 Board shall develop the actions described in  
22 paragraph (1) in coordination with the Sec-  
23 retary of Transportation.

24 (B) FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRA-  
25 TION.—The Capitol Police Board shall coordi-

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1       nate with the Administrator of the Federal  
2       Aviation Administration when any action au-  
3       thorized by this section may affect aviation  
4       safety, civilian aviation or aerospace operations,  
5       aircraft worthiness, or the use of the airspace.

6       (3) RESEARCH, TESTING, TRAINING, AND EVAL-  
7       UATION.—The Capitol Police Board may conduct re-  
8       search, testing, training on, or evaluation of any  
9       equipment, including any electronic equipment, to  
10      determine the capability or utility of the equipment  
11      prior to the use of the equipment or the technology  
12      included in the equipment for any action described  
13      in subsection (b)(1).

14      (c) FORFEITURE.—Any unmanned aircraft system  
15      described in subsection (a) seized pursuant to this section  
16      is subject to forfeiture to the United States.

17      (d) REGULATIONS AND GUIDANCE.—

18      (1) IN GENERAL.—In coordination with the  
19      Secretary of Transportation, the Capitol Police  
20      Board may prescribe regulations and shall issue  
21      guidance to carry out this Act.

22      (2) FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION.—  
23      The Capitol Police Board shall coordinate with the  
24      Administrator of the Federal Aviation Administra-  
25      tion to issue any guidance or otherwise implement

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1 this section if such guidance or implementation may  
2 affect aviation safety, civilian aviation or aerospace  
3 operations, aircraft airworthiness, or the use of air-  
4 space.

5 (e) PRIVACY PROTECTION.—The regulations or guid-  
6 ance issued to carry out the actions authorized under sub-  
7 section (b) shall ensure that—

8 (1) the interception or acquisition of, or access  
9 to, or maintenance or use of, communications to or  
10 from an unmanned aircraft system under this sec-  
11 tion is conducted in a manner consistent with the  
12 First and Fourth Amendments to the Constitution  
13 of the United States and applicable provisions of  
14 Federal law;

15 (2) communications to or from an unmanned  
16 aircraft system are intercepted or acquired only to  
17 the extent necessary to support an action described  
18 in subsection (b)(1);

19 (3) records of such communications are main-  
20 tained only for as long as necessary, and in no event  
21 for more than 180 days, unless the Capitol Police  
22 Board determines that maintenance of such records  
23 is necessary to investigate or prosecute a violation of  
24 law, directly support an ongoing security operation,



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1 is required under Federal law, or for the purpose of  
2 any litigation;

3 (4) such communications are not disclosed out-  
4 side the United States Capitol Police unless the dis-  
5 closure—

6 (A) is necessary to investigate or prosecute  
7 a violation of law;

8 (B) would support the Department of De-  
9 fense, a Federal law enforcement agency, or the  
10 enforcement activities of a regulatory agency of  
11 the Federal Government in connection with a  
12 criminal or civil investigation of, or any regu-  
13 latory, statutory, or other enforcement action  
14 relating to an action described in subsection  
15 (b)(1); or

16 (C) is otherwise required by law; and

17 (5) to the extent necessary, the United States  
18 Capitol Police may share threat information, which  
19 shall not include communications referred to in sub-  
20 section (b), with State, local, territorial, or tribal law  
21 enforcement agencies in the course of a security or  
22 protection operation.

23 (f) REPORT TO CONGRESS.—

24 (1) IN GENERAL.—Not later than 6 months  
25 after the date of the enactment of this section, and

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1 every 6 months thereafter, the Chief of the Capitol  
 2 Police, or another individual designated by the Cap-  
 3 itol Police Board, shall provide to the appropriate  
 4 congressional committees a written report on the ac-  
 5 tivities of the Capitol Police Board carried out under  
 6 this section.

7 (2) CONTENT.—The report described in para-  
 8 graph (1) shall include—

9 (A) policies, programs, and procedures to  
 10 mitigate or eliminate impacts of such activities  
 11 to the National Airspace System;

12 (B) a description of instances in which ac-  
 13 tions described in subsection (b)(1) have been  
 14 taken, including all such instances that may  
 15 have resulted in harm, damage, or loss to a per-  
 16 son or to private property;

17 (C) a description of the guidance, policies,  
 18 or procedures established to address privacy,  
 19 civil rights, and civil liberties issues implicated  
 20 by the actions allowed under this section, as  
 21 well as any changes or subsequent efforts that  
 22 would significantly affect privacy, civil rights or  
 23 civil liberties;

24 (D) a description of options considered and  
 25 steps taken to mitigate any identified impacts

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1 to the national airspace system related to the  
 2 use of any system or technology, including the  
 3 minimization of the use of any technology that  
 4 disrupts the transmission of radio or electronic  
 5 signals, for carrying out the actions described  
 6 in subsection (b)(1);

7 (E) a description of instances in which  
 8 communications intercepted or acquired during  
 9 the course of operations of an unmanned air-  
 10 craft system were held for more than 180 days  
 11 or shared outside of the United States Capitol  
 12 Police;

13 (F) how the Capitol Police Board has—

14 (i) informed the public as to the pos-  
 15 sible use of authorities under this section;  
 16 and

17 (ii) engaged with Federal, State, and  
 18 local law enforcement agencies to imple-  
 19 ment and use such authorities; and

20 (G) a description of any new technology or  
 21 equipment deployed by the Capitol Police Board  
 22 to carry out the actions described in subsection  
 23 (b)(1) and the options considered to mitigate  
 24 any identified impacts to the national airspace

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1 system related to the use of the technology or  
2 equipment.

3 (3) UNCLASSIFIED FORM.—The report de-  
4 scribed in paragraph (1) shall be in unclassified  
5 form, but may be accompanied by an additional clas-  
6 sified annex.

7 (g) RULES OF CONSTRUCTION.—

8 (1) Nothing in this section may be construed to  
9 vest in the Capitol Police Board any authority of the  
10 Secretary of Transportation or the Administrator of  
11 the Federal Aviation Administration.

12 (2) Nothing in this section may be construed to  
13 vest in the Secretary of Transportation or the Ad-  
14 ministrator of the Federal Aviation Administration  
15 any authority of the Capitol Police Board.

16 (h) TERMINATION.—The authority to carry out this  
17 section with respect to a covered Capitol Police facility or  
18 asset described in subparagraph (C) of subsection (j)(2)  
19 shall terminate on the date identified in section 210G(i)  
20 of the Homeland Security Act of 2002 (6 U.S.C. 124n).

21 (i) SCOPE OF AUTHORITY.—The Capitol Police  
22 Board may not operate any other program to mitigate a  
23 credible threat posed by an unmanned aircraft system  
24 other than the program under this section.

25 (j) DEFINITIONS.—In this section:

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1 (1) APPROPRIATE CONGRESSIONAL COMMIT-  
 2 TEES.—The term “appropriate congressional com-  
 3 mittees” means the following:

4 (A) The Committee on House Administra-  
 5 tion of the House of Representatives.

6 (B) The Committee on Rules and Adminis-  
 7 tration of the Senate.

8 (2) COVERED CAPITOL POLICE FACILITY OR  
 9 ASSET.—The term “covered Capitol Police facility or  
 10 asset” means—

11 (A) the Capitol Buildings as described in  
 12 section 5101 of title 40, United States Code;

13 (B) the United States Capitol Grounds as  
 14 described in section 5102 of title 40, United  
 15 States Code; or

16 (C) any area described in section 9A(a) of  
 17 the Act entitled “An Act to define the area of  
 18 the United States Capitol Grounds, to regulate  
 19 the use thereof, and for other purposes”, ap-  
 20 proved July 31, 1946 (2 U.S.C. 1966(a)), as di-  
 21 rected by the Capitol Police Board.

22 (3) ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION; INTERCEPT;  
 23 ORAL COMMUNICATION; WIRE COMMUNICATION.—  
 24 The terms “electronic communication”, “intercept”,  
 25 “oral communication”, and “wire communication”

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1       have the meaning given those terms in section 2510  
2       of title 18, United States Code.  
3       (4) UNMANNED AIRCRAFT SYSTEM.—The term  
4       “unmanned aircraft system” has the meaning given  
5       such term in section 44801 of title 49, United  
6       States Code.

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February 24, 2025 (3:59 p.m.)

Mr. GIMENEZ. The gentleman's time has expired.

I now recognize the gentlewoman from South Carolina for her second round of questioning.

Mrs. BIGGS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

So TSA has made progress in deploying biometric screening, digital IDs, and automated security lanes, but outdated systems and work force shortages still slow down those checkpoints.

Republicans have long advocated for smart investments in innovative technologies that can improve the performance and reduce reliance on biological Federal work forces.

So, Mr. Freeman, given TSA's growing use of AI-driven threat detection and facial recognition, how far are we from replacing out-

dated manual processes at checkpoints with fully automated systems?

Mr. FREEMAN. Thank you, Congresswoman.

I think the first thing to acknowledge is what TSA has done well is give travelers around the country, no matter what airport they're at, a sense of not just security but also a sense of consistency.

The biggest thing that frustrates travelers is, when you go through one airport, you have a different experience when you go through another airport. TSA has ensured that we have that degree of consistency, and we applaud them for it.

Some of that consistency includes exactly what you're talking about. We're already moving toward more of that automated system. We see some of that with the identity verification that's taking place. We see that with digital ID that happens and is working with the airlines, with Delta, United, with American.

If you fly through Newark and Atlanta, some of these other major hubs, Detroit, you can go through the entire process just based on your facial biometrics. It's a wonderful experience. It's incredibly efficient. Travelers are moving through in 7 seconds or less using that technology.

So I think we're already there. The question is, how quickly can we continue to build on this? How do we take it beyond the identity verification and use it for baggage screening, use it for individual screening? That's where there's so much more opportunity.

I think there's opportunities for the private sector to work more closely with TSA to help realize some of these opportunities. You know, there's so much debate about privatize TSA, not privatize TSA.

What there is, is a great opportunity for TSA, which has done some very good things, to work more closely with the private sector and really build a partnership here that can give the travelers the experience they desire.

Mrs. BIGGS. Thank you. Just following up with that, are there successful models abroad that the United States should consider adapting to our aviation environment?

Mr. FREEMAN. There are absolutely lessons learned in the United Kingdom and other parts of the world. In fact, the report that we put out earlier this year referenced some of those lessons learned in foreign markets.

I don't think there's one market that is the panacea for what we need to do, but there's a combination of lessons learned throughout Europe and in other parts of the world. We're happy to bring those forward. We document several of those in our proposal, and I think we just—sometimes the United States acts as if we're the first ones to confront these issues, as if we can't learn from some of our partners around the world.

There's no need to reinvent the wheel here. There's some very good things that are done. Europe has made much further strides in terms of allowing people to bring liquids back onto planes, to keep some of their clothes on, their shoes and belts. We can learn from that, and we're hopeful that new TSA leadership will be willing to do that.

Mrs. BIGGS. Thank you so much for your testimony.

I yield back.

Mr. GIMENEZ. Thank you to the gentlewoman from South Carolina.

I want to thank the witnesses for their valuable testimony, also the Members for their questions.

The Members of the subcommittee may have additional questions for the witnesses, and we would ask the witnesses to respond to these in writing.

Pursuant to committee rule VII(E), the hearing record will be held open for 10 days.

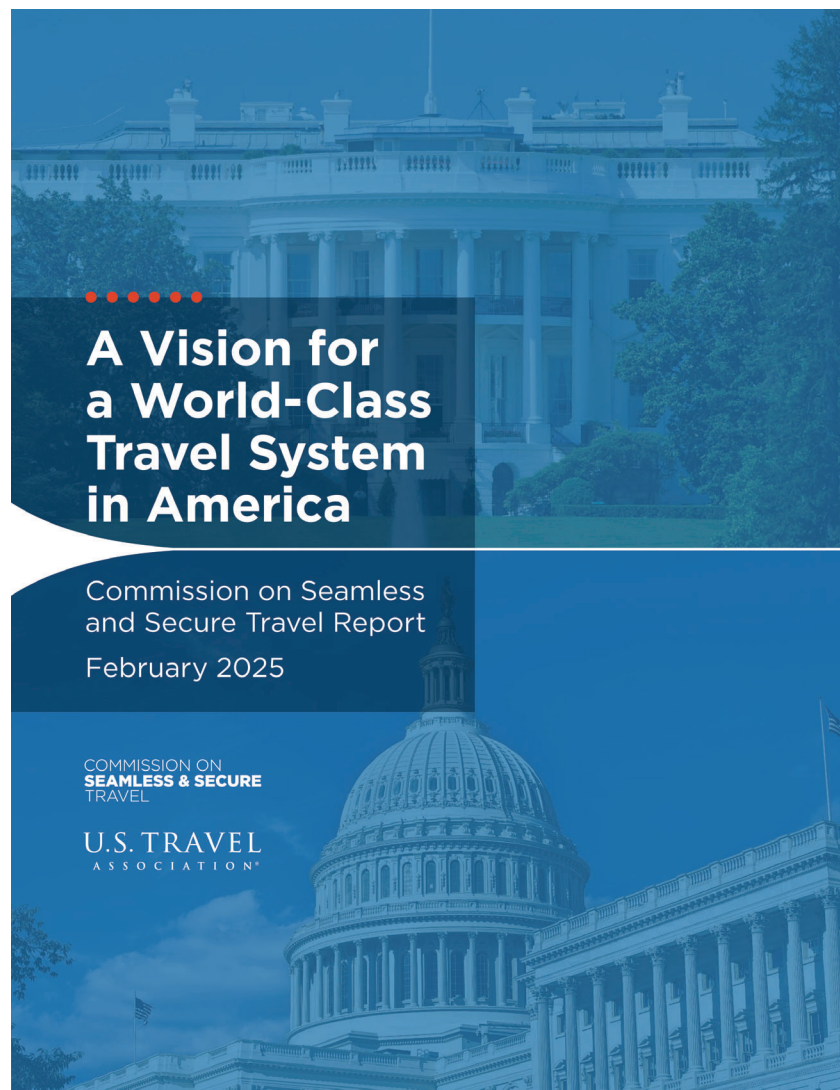
Without objection, this subcommittee stands adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:28 a.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]



## APPENDIX I

SUPPLEMENTAL TESTIMONY OF GEOFF FREEMAN, PRESIDENT AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE  
OFFICER, U.S. TRAVEL ASSOCIATION





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## Executive Summary

**America is no longer the top destination for global travel. International visitation to the U.S. peaked in 2018 under President Trump but has failed to reach those levels since. The U.S. now ranks behind Spain and France in the global competition for visitors. China is on a path to catch or surpass us over the next decade. Our competitors are investing billions to leapfrog the U.S. and win a bigger share of the \$11.1 trillion in economic benefits from the global travel market.**

It's time for a new strategy — a strategy to secure America's global travel leadership and establish the U.S. as the world's top destination. Just regaining our lost market share, which declined from 12.8% to 9.1% since 2015, would generate 127 million additional visitors over the next decade, resulting in \$478 billion in additional spending with U.S. businesses, 140,000 new American jobs and generate \$55 billion in tax revenue.

But we should aim higher. And the opportunity is right on our doorstep.

Over the next four years, America is set to host several premier events — including the 2025 Ryder Cup, America's 250th birthday, the 2026 FIFA World Cup and the 2028 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games.

**With Presidential leadership and the right policies in place, these events can welcome 40 million international visitors and drive \$95 billion in economic activity.**



• • • • •  
**We need a new strategy to secure America's global travel leadership.**

To help seize this opportunity and regain American travel dominance, the [U.S. Travel Association](#) established the [Commission on Seamless and Secure Travel](#). Comprised of key leaders across the private and public sectors, the commission spent nearly a year gathering evidence, studying the latest security technologies and learning how progress is being made both at home and abroad.

The commission's report offers a guide for the Trump Administration and Congress to fulfill President Trump's pledge to usher in a Golden Age of Travel. Based on the commission's work, U.S. Travel recommends that Congress and the Trump Administration take four crucial steps to make America the top travel destination:



## 1

**Establish White House leadership to showcase America at premier events.** In the first 100 days, the Trump Administration should establish an interagency task force, chaired by a senior White House official, to bring sustained leadership and focus across the federal government to take advantage of global events coming our way over the next four years. The administration should leverage Brand USA, a public-private partnership, to market America's destinations to the world and increase international visitation for these events.

## 2

**Deliver on President Trump's promise to efficiently and securely process visas for the 2026 FIFA World Cup.**

- **Provide full-strength consular staffing for visa processing.** Fully staff visa processing windows during all available business hours and surge staff to remotely process visa applications.
- **Extend visa validity for vetted, lawful visitors.** Extend B-1/B-2 visa validity for two years for lawful visa holders who have never been refused a visa, have previously visited the U.S., left the country on time and have no immigration or criminal violations.

- **Establish a National Vetting Service that builds on President Trump's National Vetting Center.** Rather than relying on entry-level foreign service bureaucrats to conduct visa processing, seek legislation to establish a new National Vetting Service (NVS) dedicated to visa processing and traveler vetting. The NVS would be a professional national security workforce that is fully funded through visa fees, separate from the Foreign Service, and could be surged anywhere in the world to efficiently handle visa processing demand.
- **Create a "Secure Travel Partnership" program to increase countries that have strong travel security agreements with the U.S.** Establish a Secure Travel Partnership program where countries could qualify for visa facilitation benefits by meeting all security requirements of the Visa Waiver Program (VWP) and keeping refusal rates below 12% and overstay rates below 5%. In return, highly qualified first-time B-1/B-2 visa applicants from Partnership countries could have in-person interviews and biometric collection done by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) upon arrival at U.S. airports, rather than by appointment at U.S. consulates and embassies.

### 3

**Create the world's most advanced and secure airport screening process.** Deploy state-of-the-art screening technology that strengthens security AND reduces wait times by allowing all travelers to carry water bottles and larger liquids, leave all electronics in their bags and keep their shoes, jackets and belts on.

- **Make a historic investment in security technology.** Immediately end the diversion of the Passenger Security Fee and increase technology funding to generate \$10 billion to modernize the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and put new identity verification, on-person screening and baggage scanning technology in every U.S. airport lane within five years.



## 4

**Create strong, modern and efficient airport borders to keep America safe and global travel moving.**

- **Provide full-strength staffing at airport customs.** Fund an additional 2,000 CBP officers to fully staff U.S. airports of entry, Surge CBP staffing to the National Targeting Center, National Vetting Center and Global Entry processing to maximize security while facilitating record travel.
- **End hours-long customs wait times for Americans returning home from abroad.** Expand CBP's Enhanced Passenger Processing (EPP) and Seamless Border Entry (SBE) to the top 25 airports by the end of 2026. EPP allows low-risk U.S. citizens to forgo customs interviews if they pass pre-arrival vetting, have their identities biometrically confirmed and have nothing to declare. SBE uses advanced biometric technology to confirm the identities of Global Entry travelers on the move, without the need to stop at a kiosk.
- **Strengthen protection against immigration overstays.** Invest \$600 million to complete CBP's biometric air exit system within two years and enhance the Traveler Verification Service (TVS) that is used to identify travelers entering and exiting the U.S.



Implementing these recommendations will strengthen our economy, create jobs across the country and improve our trade balance while ensuring America remains a secure and welcoming destination for international travelers.

**To learn how modernizing our travel systems will deliver a world-class experience for both domestic and international travelers, visit [ShowcaseAmericanTravel.org](https://ShowcaseAmericanTravel.org).**



# Introduction

## America is Losing Ground

### THE UNITED STATES IS IN A RACE — AND WE'RE FALLING BEHIND

One of the fastest-growing, most strategically important and most lucrative segments of the global economy is up for grabs. The industry at stake is travel — the everyday movement of millions of people across the world.

America once led this competition. But today, we are no longer the top destination for global travel. International visitation to the U.S. peaked in 2018 under President Trump and has not returned to those levels since.<sup>1</sup>

**While the U.S. currently boasts the world's largest travel market, China's rapid travel growth has the country on track to catch and then surpass the U.S. by nearly \$500 billion over the next decade.<sup>2</sup>**

India's travel market is also expanding quickly, which should help that nation jump from eighth place globally to fourth in terms of market size by 2034.<sup>3</sup>

By 2035, China plans to increase the number of civil airports by over 50%, while India expects to increase annual air passenger traffic from 376 million today to over 3 billion by 2047.<sup>4</sup> Overall, the Asia Pacific region is rapidly building out its travel infrastructure to accommodate aspiring travelers, accounting for more than one-third of major construction projects at existing airports and more than half of new airport construction.<sup>5</sup>



And other countries are also intent on seizing a larger share of the global travel boom.

**Saudi Arabia is investing more than \$1 trillion over the next decade as part of its strategy to attract 100 million visitors by 2030.<sup>6</sup>**

The goal is to diversify the oil-rich country's economy, using travel as one of the main levers. Saudi officials are actively marketing the nation's UNESCO sites as cultural destinations, while building up Saudi Arabia as a sports tourism hub.<sup>7</sup>

In the UAE, Abu Dhabi's Tourism Strategy 2030 aims to double overnight visitors, create nearly 200,000 tourism jobs and invest \$10 billion in new museums, theme parks, cultural sites and hotel rooms.<sup>8</sup> To attract new visitors, Abu Dhabi plans to more than double its marketing and promotion campaign to reach out to 15 new markets.<sup>9</sup>

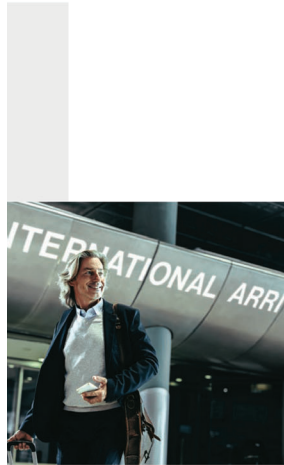
### NATIONAL LEADERSHIP IS NEEDED

As the examples above illustrate, our competitors in the travel market are developing bold strategies, making large investments and focusing on supporting travel at their countries' highest levels. This is the primary reason that when it comes to the strength of our national travel strategy, the U.S. ranks dead last among the top 18 travel markets.<sup>10</sup>

**The result: America is losing global market share for long-haul travelers — declining 41% since 2000.<sup>11</sup>**

We've slipped to third in the global competition for travelers, behind Spain and France, despite our status as the world's most desirable destination.<sup>12</sup>

Research by Oxford Economics reveals that our nation's total global market share has also declined, falling from 12.8% to 9.1% since 2015.<sup>13</sup> Simply regaining our losses would result in an additional 127 million visitors over the next decade, generating \$478 billion in extra spending at U.S. businesses, adding 140,000 additional jobs and generating \$55 billion in extra tax revenues compared to the baseline scenario.<sup>14</sup>



♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦  
**41% decline in market share of long-haul travelers.**



Reaping these benefits requires overcoming some serious challenges:

- **Limited biometric screening capabilities**, with only 50% of total outbound international air passengers screened through biometric exit.<sup>15</sup>
- **Delayed timelines for new technology** means the U.S. will not fully deploy leading-edge Computed Tomography (CT) bag scanners until 2042, compromising both greater efficiency and security.<sup>16</sup>
- **Low visa-free travel opportunities** mean visitors from only 43 countries can visit the U.S. visa free, compared to 102 countries for the U.K.<sup>17</sup>
- **High visa wait times**, with visitors requiring a visa experiencing wait times that can exceed six months or even a year.<sup>18</sup>
- **Border processing resources** are not being prioritized, leading to staffing shortages, lengthy wait times at airport customs and denial of new international routes.
- **Existing security and screening systems** will increasingly struggle to handle rising travel volume. On December 1, 2024, TSA screened almost 3.1 million travelers — the highest ever in a single day.<sup>19</sup> In two years, they'll have to do it 50 times a year. By 2028, when we host the Summer Olympics, they'll have to do it 100 times a year. And according to projections by Oxford Economics, within this decade we will average 3 million passengers every day of the week.

These inefficiencies and shortcomings pose dire economic consequences.

Excessive visa wait times alone could cost the U.S. \$150 billion in spending over the next ten years by encouraging 39 million visitors to travel elsewhere.<sup>20</sup> Losing just a single international route due to Customs and Border Protection staff shortages translates into up to a \$227 million loss to the U.S. economy every year.<sup>21</sup>

## A VISION FOR AMERICAN TRAVEL DOMINANCE



.....  
**According to the 2026 FIFA World Cup, the event alone could bring some six million visitors to our country.**

Despite these challenges to America's travel leadership and the threats from global competitors, the U.S. has a tremendous opportunity to dominate the global travel race.

Over the next decade, the U.S. will host a series of marquee events, including the 2025 Ryder Cup, the 2026 FIFA World Cup, America's 250th birthday, followed by the 2028 Summer Olympics and Paralympics, the 2031 Men's Rugby World Cup, the 2034 Winter Olympics and Paralympics and annual Formula One races in Las Vegas, Miami and Austin.

Millions of visitors will come to the U.S. for these events, giving America the chance to showcase some of our greatest destinations and turn new international visitors into repeat customers.

These events will only accelerate the global travel boom. Over the next decade, travel's global economic impact is projected to grow from \$11.1 trillion today to a staggering \$16 trillion — growing at a rate significantly faster than the overall global economy and employing over 12% of workers worldwide.

We need to win our share of this expanding market.

**Travel is already vital to the U.S. economy, generating \$2.8 trillion in economic output in 2023, representing 2.5% of our nation's GDP.<sup>22</sup> More than \$1.3 trillion in travel spending contributed \$89 billion in tax revenues in states and communities across the U.S.<sup>23</sup>**

And more than 15 million American workers are either directly employed or heavily supported by travel.<sup>24</sup>

Our goal must be to make travel more modern, convenient and secure. This requires establishing leadership, developing solutions, prioritizing funding and driving substantive policy change in Washington that generates real benefits.

To further this goal, U.S. Travel established the Commission on Seamless and Secure Travel. Comprised of former government leaders from key agencies impacting travel and experts from across the private sector, the commission spent nearly a year gathering evidence, conducting field

visits and traveling to learn how progress is being made at home and abroad and how the U.S. can harness and expedite innovation.

## OUR VISION FOR AMERICAN TRAVEL DOMINANCE RESTS ON THREE PILLARS

### 1

**A thriving travel economy** where the U.S. government and private sector work hand-in-hand to capture a greater market share from our competitors and beat other countries for visitors. Where travel makes a rising contribution to America's economy, creates more good-paying middle-class jobs and generates rising exports to drive down our trade deficit. And where travel is valued by national leaders as an essential engine of U.S. economic growth.

### 2

**A shift in government mindset** so Washington recognizes it has a dual mandate to both ensure security and foster travel growth. Where travel security and efficiency are viewed as mutually reinforcing, not mutually exclusive. Where the best security measures are understood as those easiest to follow, not the most burdensome. Where travel becomes a top priority for Congress, equipping agencies with the funding, tools and support to drive innovation.

### 3

**A new traveler experience** where a seamless, efficient and welcoming travel process is the norm. Imagine a future where travelers move efficiently through airports, customs and security checkpoints. Biometric innovations and automated screening create an environment where safety and security are assured without sacrificing efficiency, comfort or privacy. In this vision, the journey to and within the United States becomes a highlight rather than a hurdle, setting a new global standard for traveler satisfaction and operational excellence.



## MOVING FROM VISION TO ACTION

This report presents a path for change. It not only outlines the major challenges that must be overcome, but also provides a specific set of recommendations that can — and must — be achieved. Major areas of focus include:

### CREATE THE WORLD'S MOST ADVANCED AND SECURE AIRPORT SCREENING PROCESS.

Nearly two-thirds (64%) of Americans say shorter airport lines is their top priority for improving air travel.<sup>25</sup> And they overwhelmingly support the technology that can get us there. In fact, a strong majority of air travelers (79%), Americans (78%), Republicans (76%) and Democrats (80%) favor the use of biometrics at TSA security checkpoints.<sup>26</sup> This technology not only makes screening faster and more accurate, it also greatly improves security by replacing weak manual identity verification. Yet, at current congressional funding levels, TSA will not be able to fully deploy advanced Credential Authentication Technology (CAT) across the entire U.S. aviation system until 2049.<sup>27</sup>



We need to make a historic investment in security technology, including leading-edge CT baggage scanners, CAT and biometric identity verification, as well as research and development. Approximately one-third of the Passenger Security Fee — designed to fund aviation security — is currently being diverted to general government programs. Ending this diversion would generate \$10 billion to invest in state-of-the-art identity verification and screening technology at every U.S. airport.

### **ESTABLISH A ROBUST, EFFICIENT AND SECURE VETTING PROCESS FOR INTERNATIONAL VISITORS.**

Critical reforms are needed to modernize America's outdated visa processing system and to enhance security while mitigating severe backlogs and inefficiencies. Comprehensive reforms would include fully staffing consular offices to maximize processing capacity while extending visa validity periods for proven low-risk travelers. In addition, rather than relying on entry-level foreign service officers, the U.S. should create a National Vetting Service with specialized professionals dedicated to visa processing and traveler vetting funded through visa fees. We should also establish a new Secure Travel Partnership program with qualified countries that meet strict security requirements and receive facilitation benefits. These changes would maintain robust security standards and bring U.S. visa processing into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **STRENGTHEN AND MODERNIZE BORDER ENTRY AT U.S. AIRPORTS TO FORTIFY SCREENING AND SPEED PROCESSING.**

Too often, poorly resourced U.S. customs operations and outdated technology result in hours-long delays that hamper efficiency and undermine security effectiveness. CBP staffing must be ramped up. Enhanced Passenger Processing (EPP) and Seamless Border Entry (SBE) should be expanded and we should provide the resources necessary to complete CBP's biometric exit tracking by 2026. This would strengthen the identification of both arriving and departing travelers, creating a more efficient and secure entry-exit system at U.S. airports and protect against visa overstays.

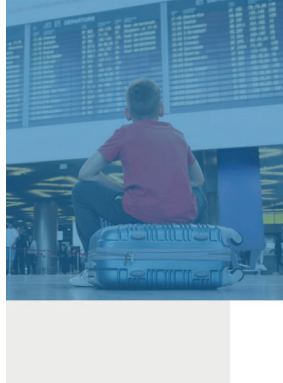
These and other needed reforms to make America's travel experience more secure and seamless require leadership from the White House.

America should be a leader, not a laggard when it comes to integrating the best innovations to create a better travel experience. The commission's report should serve as a wakeup call for policymakers that action is urgently needed. But it also points to solutions that will enable the U.S. to secure dominance of the strategically and economically vital travel market.



• • • • •  
**Only the White House can generate the urgency and focus needed to galvanize change across the federal government and build support in Congress for legislative action.**





The commission's bottom-line conclusion is clear. Through immediate investment, innovation and technology, America must act now to transform travel into a more efficient, secure, and frankly, more welcoming experience. By implementing the commission's recommendations within this critical four-year window, we can realize tangible benefits: accelerated economic growth, rapid job creation across the nation, and an improved trade deficit. Every day of delay represents missed opportunities. With decisive action today, we can strengthen our position as a secure, friendly, and welcoming destination for global travelers.

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## A Call for Government-Wide Leadership and Coordination

### ENSURING FEDERAL LEADERSHIP ON TRAVEL

**The U.S. holds a dubious distinction among the world's major economies: We are the only G20 country without a federal agency or Cabinet-level official in charge of travel policy.**

Most top travel markets have a minister of travel or tourism to guide national strategy for competing in the highly lucrative and strategically important travel sector. In the U.S., the top federal travel official is the Assistant Secretary for Travel and Tourism at the Department of Commerce. But that role remains empty, despite Congressional funding to fill it.

This helps explain why, according to a recent study by Euromonitor International, the U.S. ranks last when it comes to government leadership on travel-related issues and the strength of its national travel strategy.<sup>1</sup>

Travel industry policy issues cut across many areas of the federal government, including the Departments of Commerce, Transportation, Homeland Security and State. Each department, as well as their component agencies and offices, have unique missions that impact travel to and within the U.S. However, absent senior leadership, high-level strategy and effective coordination, the federal government cannot properly assess and prioritize the entire travel process or ensure American leadership in this market.

#### RANKINGS OF COUNTRIES FOR GLOBAL TRAVEL LEADERSHIP

- 1 Thailand
- 2 Brazil
- 3 Greece
- 4 Saudi Arabia
- 5 Turkey
- 6 South Africa
- 7 Italy
- 8 China
- 9 Canada
- 10 Australia
- 11 France
- 12 UAE
- 13 United Kingdom
- 14 Mexico
- 15 Spain
- 16 Germany
- 17 Singapore
- 18 USA**



## MEGA-DECADE OF EVENTS

MILLIONS OF VISITORS  
ARE EXPECTED TO  
ATTEND

### 2025

- FIFA Club World Cup
- Ryder Cup

### 2026

- FIFA World Cup
- America250

### 2028

- Summer Olympics
- Paralympic Games

### 2031

- Men's Rugby World Cup

### 2033

- Women's Rugby World Cup

### 2034

- Winter Olympics
- Paralympic Games

As a result, many federal actions and initiatives that impact travel are often planned and executed in a silo. Additionally, agencies responsible for essential elements of travel, like CBP and TSA, must do more with their limited resources and without proper guidance from the most senior levels of government. This lack of leadership hinders America's ability to advance major improvements to the entire travel ecosystem due to a lack of coordination across key components of government.

These challenges will become even more pressing as the mega-decade of events unfolds beginning in 2025. With millions of international visitors needing to attain visitor visas, clear customs, and go through aviation security checkpoints — as well as the millions of domestic travelers entering the travel system — the U.S. must be ready. However, that will not happen without White House leadership.

**RECOMMENDATION:** In its first 100 days, the Trump Administration should establish an interagency task force, chaired by a senior White House official, to bring sustained leadership and focus across the federal government on preparations for the 2025 Ryder Cup, America 250, the 2026 FIFA World Cup, the 2028 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games, and other large scale global events hosted in the U.S.

Filling the Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Travel and Tourism is important for advancing travel in the U.S. But one assistant secretary in one department cannot oversee and direct the numerous agencies responsible for different elements of the travel system. Nor does this role have the power and standing of the cabinet- and minister-level officials who lead travel in other nations that compete with the U.S.

The Assistant Secretary is responsible for developing and implementing a national strategy to grow domestic and international travel, streamlining government processes affecting both business and leisure travel, and helping U.S. cities and counties compete for large international meetings

and events, among other responsibilities. The Department of Commerce does not have the necessary authority or resources to execute these priorities on its own and must rely on other departments and agencies to help fulfill such initiatives — especially when facing a mega-decade of events.

A senior level interagency task force must be driven by the White House to ensure maximum prioritization and coordination. It could be chaired by the Department of Commerce but must include key leaders from the Departments of State, Homeland Security and Transportation, among others.

**The task force should focus on near-term challenges — such as preparing for the mega-decade of events coming to the U.S. — while also developing a long-term strategy to expand travel to and within the U.S.**

Leveraging Brand USA, a public-private partnership, to provide visa, security and other key travel information to visitors and increase international visitation for upcoming events will be critical to maximizing this unprecedented opportunity.

#### EXPANDING TRUSTED TRAVELER ENROLLMENT

Over the past decade, DHS Trusted Traveler Programs such as TSA PreCheck and CBP's Global Entry have expanded significantly in response to rising demand among travelers seeking expedited processing and enhanced security.

Launched in 2013, TSA PreCheck has grown from a pilot program to one of the most popular expedited screening programs in the world. Airport and airline participation has increased greatly, helping enrollment surge to over 20 million active members as of August 2024.<sup>2</sup> CBP's Global Entry, introduced in 2008, has also expanded significantly, with more participating countries and airports and membership rising to meet demand.<sup>3</sup> CBP saw a record 4.1 million Trusted Traveler applications in 2023 and is on pace for nearly 5 million this year.<sup>4</sup>

Other programs, such as NEXUS, SENTRI, and FAST, have expanded to serve specific traveler needs for border crossing, enhancing security while facilitating faster processing.



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**Congress and federal agencies must provide the resources and leadership to expand the Trusted Traveler population to keep pace with rising demand.**



As more travelers, airports and countries participate, Trusted Traveler Programs are building a track record of success in managing both travel volume and security risk. The U.S. government — both Congress and relevant Executive branch agencies — must provide the resources and leadership needed to keep pace with rising demand, which will encourage more individuals to travel and join the “trusted” category — a major benefit to both security and efficiency.

The commission commends TSA and CBP for recognizing the need to increase capacity to meet these demands. For example, TSA expanded its partnerships to now include three enrollment providers for TSA PreCheck.<sup>5</sup> For its part, CBP has increased Global Entry enrollment options by adding Enrollment on Arrival — where conditionally approved applicants complete the final interview with a CBP officer upon return from an international trip.<sup>6</sup>

However, the agencies must continue streamlining the enrollment process, with the goal of expanding the programs to include more travelers in the future.<sup>7</sup> By leveraging other government entities and the private sector, both agencies can improve efficiency, reduce administrative burdens, and expand Trusted Traveler enrollment.

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**RECOMMENDATION:** CBP should move administrative actions from officers to non-law enforcement personnel or private sector partners for the Global Entry enrollment process. CBP and the State Department should allow applicants for U.S. passports to apply for Global Entry on the same application.

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Currently, the entire Global Entry enrollment process is conducted by CBP law enforcement officers. While many critical security steps require CBP law enforcement personnel, other steps could be performed by civilian personnel or even private sector partners, similar to how TSA has leveraged private sector providers to perform PreCheck enrollment functions.

Much of the administrative burden of enrollment lies in collecting identification and other enrollment documents. Since documentation requirements for U.S. passport and Global Entry applicants largely overlap, CBP and State should streamline processes by allowing passport applicants to apply for Global Entry at the same time. This could reduce administrative burdens on the government and ease the application process for travelers — ultimately reducing application timelines and increasing the number of Trusted Travelers.

Streamlining the application process would also enhance personal privacy protection by minimizing the number of times individuals must submit sensitive personally identifiable information (PII). The federal government already has established mechanisms for securely sharing sensitive information, including CBP and State as they share traveler and immigrant vetting information, for example.

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**RECOMMENDATION:** TSA should partner with state DMVs to allow REAL ID applicants to apply for PreCheck in the REAL ID application.

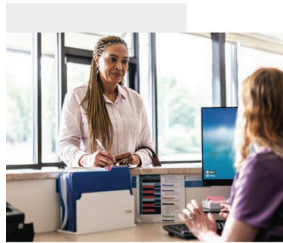
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**Streamlining the Global Entry application process will reduce administrative burdens on the government and travelers — ultimately reducing application timelines and increasing the number of Trusted Travelers.**

TSA could reduce its administrative burden and ease the application process for travelers by allowing REAL ID applicants to add PreCheck to their application, given the overlapping requirements for identification and other enrollment documents. This could increase PreCheck enrollment and expand the lagging REAL ID adoption rate ahead of the May 2025 deadline. Establishing mechanisms to securely share documentation between TSA and state DMVs could result in major efficiencies for REAL ID and PreCheck applicants while reducing security vulnerabilities associated with submitting PII and other sensitive information across multiple agencies.

### STREAMLINING TECHNOLOGY OVERSIGHT



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**Allowing travelers to add PreCheck when applying for REAL ID will help increase enrollment and adoption rates.**

DHS supports the operational needs of its component agencies by providing essential funding, equipment, and personnel. It offers strategic guidance to ensure operational activities align with national security goals and priorities, while supporting training and development to enhance the capabilities of its people. DHS facilitates coordination among agencies to address complex, multi-faceted threats effectively. It also oversees and integrates data and intelligence sharing to enhance situational awareness and decision-making. These activities help ensure consistency and efficiency across DHS agencies.

DHS actions should ultimately work to streamline and enhance field operations by providing operators with the necessary resources and strategic coordination. By aligning policies and support mechanisms with operational realities, DHS should enable field personnel to respond effectively to emerging threats and manage incidents efficiently. This support empowers operators with the tools and information needed to carry out their missions and maintain national security.

The commission notes that both CBP and TSA have robust strategies for maintaining accountability, transparency, and privacy in emerging technology, especially biometrics. Strong protections are in place to oversee the use of biometrics, including statutorily mandated public disclosures, published strategies and roadmaps,



interagency and Congressional oversight, privacy impact assessments, and opportunities for the public to opt-out of biometric collection. These robust privacy safeguards have allowed CBP and TSA to develop privacy by design processes and deploy technology with a strict adherence to maintaining accountability and transparency to the public. One commission Member noted that CBP has done more to ethically advance facial recognition than any other agency across the federal government.

The commission is concerned that DHS is currently revisiting use cases that have already undergone robust testing and deployment. Further, the commission is aware that CBP and TSA have maintained strict adherence to the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) testing process, establishing an important policy layer in the process to leverage biometrics to support the agencies' respective missions. The commission is concerned that redundant testing and evaluation will limit innovation and hinder the agencies' ability to enact new processes and deploy technology.

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**RECOMMENDATION: DHS should immediately review IT, procurement and other requirements and processes in place for component agencies to ensure they are not duplicative, overburdensome or limiting the ability to test, trial and deploy technologies and other innovative initiatives.**

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DHS agencies must be able to deploy tools that support their mission without unnecessary impediments. This is especially important for operational agencies like CBP and TSA that must maintain security effectiveness while adapting to increased travel volumes and other operational challenges.

**DHS should provide personnel and other resource support to supplement and advance agency capabilities, rather than duplicate or hinder efforts.**

For example, when testing emerging technologies like biometrics, the DHS Science and Technology Directorate (S&T) should conduct joint testing and evaluation in



.....  
**Redundant testing and evaluation hinders the deployment of new technology.**



partnership with agencies to streamline the process and timeline for operational deployment of technology. S&T should not conduct duplicative testing after components internally test emerging capabilities. DHS should maximize its resources and achieve additional efficiencies wherever it can to provide effective and nimble security for the American people.

#### Endnotes for A Call for Government-Wide Leadership and Coordination

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# Transforming Aviation Security

## INTRODUCTION

**The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) was established after 9/11 to secure the nation's transportation systems to ensure the freedom of movement of people and commerce. In carrying out this vital national security mission, TSA must constantly adapt to meet new and evolving threats, while facilitating increased travel and the economic growth that accompanies it.**

TSA is responsible for security at 440 airports. Everyday, TSA screens passengers and luggage for explosives, weapons and other dangerous items.

That volume continues to grow, upping the pressure on TSA to develop new methods for efficiently and securely screening more travelers, bags and cargo.

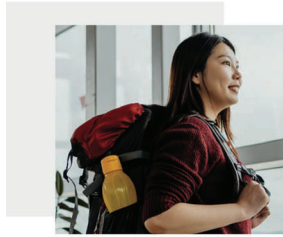
In 2023, TSA screened more than 858 million travelers at airport security checkpoints across the country — a record. Of the 100 busiest days in TSA's history, almost half (46) occurred during the summer of 2024. On July 7, 2024, the Sunday after the July 4th holiday, TSA screened over 3 million travelers for the first time in its history.<sup>1</sup>

The commission commends TSA, especially the Transportation Security Officers, Federal Air Marshals, Transportation Security Inspectors, vetting and intelligence teams and other TSA staff working on the frontlines and behind the scenes to ensure the security of the nation's transportation systems and the safety of the traveling public in the face of record travel volume.

On a daily basis, TSA screens an average of:







• • • • •  
**5 year goal for  
 all travelers:**

- Carry on liquids
- Leave electronics  
in their bag
- Keep on shoes,  
jackets, belts

The agency has made significant strides in improving its operations through innovative programs, processes and technologies. But key challenges remain, including rising aviation security threats, unprecedented travel demand, inadequate resources and wide variations in international security requirements.

These challenges must be addressed through effective public policies aimed at making the overall experience of air travel in the U.S. both more secure and more efficient. Indeed, challenges also present opportunities to adopt new approaches and implement advanced technologies, resulting in stronger security, greater system-wide capacity and higher traveler satisfaction.

The commission envisions the most significant transformation of TSA security screening since the creation of TSA PreCheck. Within 5 years, all passengers — whether PreCheck or standard — should be able to carry on larger liquids, leave all electronics in their bags and keep their shoes, jackets and belts on. TSA PreCheck travelers should be screened at speed using automated identity verification and advanced passenger and baggage screening systems.

## KEY CHALLENGES

### 1. AVIATION SECURITY THREATS REMAIN DYNAMIC

The transportation sector, especially aviation, remains a top target for foreign terrorist organizations and other bad actors. And threats are not diminishing. From March 2023 to April 2024, more than 300 individuals tried to evade some aspect of airport security, according to TSA.<sup>2</sup>

**In January 2024, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) posted videos calling for terrorist attacks against the west, including against U.S., U.K. and European airlines.<sup>3</sup>**

Identifying these threats and determining real-time risk is critical for TSA to successfully carry out its mission, especially given the strain of rising traveler volumes.

## 2. INCREASED TRAVEL VOLUME CREATES POTENTIAL FOR LONGER WAIT TIMES

Travel demand continues to surge post-pandemic, which will challenge TSA to maintain security within its wait time standards. The increasing volume of travelers puts pressure on existing infrastructure and processes, potentially leading to longer wait times and decreased traveler satisfaction.

During peak summer travel in 2024, from the Memorial Day holiday through the Labor Day holiday, TSA screened almost 279 million travelers. This record-breaking summer volume represents a nearly 6% increase over the previous year. TSA screened almost 3.1 million travelers on Sunday, December 1, 2024 — the highest one-day total ever.<sup>4</sup>

Rising travel demand translates into significant economic benefits — if the travel process becomes more efficient.

**Recent research shows that a more efficient security screening process could add three million domestic trips this year, resulting in an additional \$7.4 billion in spending.<sup>5</sup>**

With the right policies and priorities in place, 3 million travelers will likely be a monthly occurrence when the U.S. hosts the 2026 FIFA World Cup and a weekly occurrence when it hosts the 2028 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games.

**Streamlined travel screening and processes will benefit the economy:**



## 3. RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS UNDERMINE TECHNOLOGY ADOPTION

Limited federal appropriations and the diversion of the Passenger Security Fee severely hinder TSA's ability to deploy cutting-edge security technology across the aviation system. As a result, the U.S. is falling behind other nations in the race to modernize the air travel experience. Due to resource constraints, TSA will not be able to fully deploy Computed Tomography (CT) bag scanners until 2042 and Credential Authentication Technology (CAT) until 2049.<sup>6</sup> In comparison, the U.K. government has set a June 2025 deadline for all U.K. airports to complete full deployment of CT scanners, far ahead of the U.S. timeline.<sup>7</sup>

**The U.S. must address this concerning timeline to remain the top global travel destination.**

#### 4. DISPARATE INTERNATIONAL SECURITY REQUIREMENTS CREATE INEFFICIENCIES

Aviation security structures and requirements differ greatly between countries, leading to passenger confusion, inefficient operations and unequal security outcomes. While many foreign governments regulate security at only a limited number of airports, TSA manages the security operation at 440 federalized airports utilizing over 50,000 federal officers.<sup>8</sup>

In June 2024, the U.K. government allowed some airports to remove the 100ml liquid requirement only to reinstate it following issues with the effectiveness of the detection technology, creating confusion and chaos at some U.K. airports over the busy summer travel season.<sup>9</sup>

#### SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

##### 1. IMPROVING IDENTITY VERIFICATION AND QUEUE MANAGEMENT

Despite rising security threats and unprecedented travel demand, TSA still manually verifies the identity of many travelers, creating security vulnerabilities and inefficiencies for travelers. Moreover, the lack of consistency and predictability at the checkpoint can create confusion and unpleasant experiences for travelers.

Identity verification is a critical aspect of security screening. Without proper identity verification, bad actors can enter the aviation system by using false identities or receiving less scrutiny than needed. Indeed, many of the 9/11 terrorists used fraudulent identities or immigration documents to carry out their heinous attacks. “For terrorists,” the 9/11 Commission concluded, “travel documents are as important as weapons.”<sup>10</sup>

**With proper verification tools in place, TSA can identify known or suspected bad actors to prevent them from traveling and determine who presents higher or unknown risk to ensure appropriate physical screening is applied.**



Manual verification of identity is a nearly impossible task, especially at airport security checkpoints where the stakes could not be higher. Major investment in automated identity verification is an absolute necessity — especially given the growing sophistication of fraudulent identity documents; the inherent difficulty of visually matching document photographs with the individual presenting them; and the pressure of crowded checkpoints filled with anxious travelers.

Technology and automation tools can not only improve the security and efficiency of the identity verification process, but they can also improve queue management and wait times — among the biggest traveler complaints. Without these advanced solutions, travelers will continue to face mounting frustration and inconvenience when navigating airports.

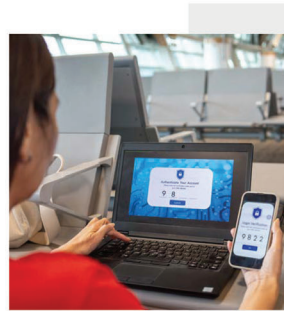
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**RECOMMENDATION: Congress must increase funding for Credential Authentication Technology (CAT) by \$300 million over the next five years to enhance identity security across the entire aviation system.**

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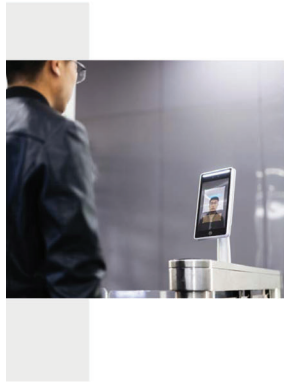
TSA has invested in automated identity verification technology that is effective at mitigating the vulnerabilities of manual identity checks.

According to TSA: Credential Authentication Technology is a security game changer, ensuring ID authentication, reservation verification and Secure Flight pre-screening status are known in “near” real-time at the airport security checkpoint. CAT is an effective tool for TSA officers, providing enhanced fraudulent ID detection capabilities while confirming the identity and flight information of travelers.<sup>11</sup>



CAT also enables TSA officers to engage passengers and assess security risks rather than spend their limited passenger engagement window looking down at identity documents and boarding passes. Enabling officers to use their analytical skills to assess passenger behavior adds another layer of security for identifying higher risk individuals, human trafficking and other illicit activities.

To date, TSA has deployed 2,093 CAT units to 231 airports. Among those, 1,916 CAT units represent the second generation (CAT-2) technology. However, at current funding levels from Congress, it will take until 2049 for TSA to reach full operational capability of CAT across the entire U.S. aviation system. From both a security and efficiency standpoint, this is unacceptable and must be immediately addressed by Congress.




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**RECOMMENDATION:** Congress should provide legislative support and funding for TSA's biometrics and digital identity initiatives to enable the agency to expand CAT-2, mobile driver's license and TSA PreCheck Touchless Identity Solution with private sector partners.

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While the commission would like to see more rapid progress, it commends the agency's efforts to incorporate biometrics into its operations. By prioritizing transparent public information and focusing on voluntary TSA PreCheck passengers, TSA has gained extensive knowledge and data that has equipped the agency to harness and expand this game-changing security technology.

Travelers enthusiastically embrace biometric technology as a secure, convenient way to improve travel.

**An October 2023 survey by the International Air Transport Association (IATA) found:**

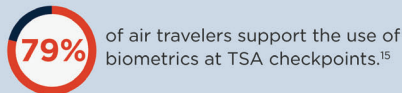


of passengers prefer using biometrics over physical documents like passports and boarding passes.<sup>12</sup>

Many countries are already leveraging biometric technology to enhance travel efficiency. Abu Dhabi's Zayed International Airport launched the Smart Travel Project to incorporate biometric identification at all points in the passenger journey — immigration, duty free, lounges and boarding — by 2025.<sup>13</sup> Singapore's Changi Airport adopted a similar initiative in August 2024 to enhance security and the traveler experience by replacing passports with biometrics.<sup>14</sup>

American travelers also welcome more biometric options as they recognize the security and efficiency benefits of the technology.

**A September 2024 survey conducted by the U.S. Travel Association and Ipsos found:**



Therefore, Congress and the Administration should provide strong support and funding for TSA's biometric technology solutions, not seek to undermine them. These tools have the power to make travel both more secure and more enjoyable, helping the U.S. remain an innovation leader and attract more visitors.

TSA is deploying second-generation CAT systems (CAT-2), which enable features like self-service, facial matching and digital identity. Facial matching automatically matches the credential photo with an optional live photo of the passenger that is deleted soon after matching is complete. This automated system enhances CAT's security effectiveness, improves efficiency and prioritizes privacy by ensuring optionality and minimizing data retention.<sup>16</sup>

Digital identity is another major innovation for automated ID verification. TSA is also using these CAT-2 units to conduct an operational assessment of digital IDs, including mobile driver's licenses (mDL) and passport-derived IDs, to provide for a secure and seamless method of verifying an individual's identity.

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**A digital ID is an electronic representation of identifying information that may be used to verify a person's identity. A mobile driver's license, which is a type of digital ID, is a digital representation of a state-issued physical driver's license, stored on a mobile electronic device, such as a smartphone, and read electronically.**



**Currently, 12 states offer digital identities or mDLs in partnership with major technology providers, including Apple, Google and Samsung, that can be used at TSA security checkpoints.<sup>17</sup>**

Participants can voluntarily present the ID at select TSA checkpoints by scanning the ID's QR code or tapping their Bluetooth enabled phone. Using facial matching, the traveler's photo is taken and matched to the photo stored on the digital ID. This provides greater privacy to the users since the traveler controls their ID while the photo and associated data are deleted after verification.

TSA must continue progress on digital identity solutions with states and the private sector. Congress should consider targeted grant funding for states to expedite digital identity solutions, especially as an investment in meeting the May 7, 2025 REAL ID deadline. For its part, TSA published a final rule in October 2024 that would allow travelers to continue using mDLs for identity verification at TSA security checkpoints once REAL ID enforcement begins.<sup>18</sup>

In addition, TSA currently partners with Delta Air Lines and United Airlines, with American Airlines soon to follow, in offering the TSA PreCheck Touchless Identity Solution, where TSA PreCheck trusted travelers can opt in to the technology and experience a more seamless security process — from bag drop to the checkpoint to boarding — at nine U.S. airports:

## 9

**U.S. airports offer  
TSA PreCheck  
Touchless  
Identity Solution**

- Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport (DCA);
- Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport (ATL);
- Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County Airport (DTW);
- Los Angeles International Airport (LAX);
- Newark Liberty International Airport (EWR);
- LaGuardia Airport (LGA);
- John F. Kennedy International Airport (JFK);
- O'Hare International Airport (ORD); and
- Salt Lake City International Airport (SLC).<sup>19</sup>

This voluntary process is faster and more accurate than manual ID checks. TSA PreCheck Touchless ID should be expanded with additional airlines and other private sector partners and should include a plan to expand the pool of eligible participants beyond TSA PreCheck passengers.

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**RECOMMENDATION:** By the end of 2025, TSA should establish and implement formal agreements with aviation and technology stakeholders to create capabilities that reduce traveler stress, provide greater predictability and decrease congestion at airport security checkpoints, such as wayfinding, real-time wait time measurements and screening appointments.

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Over the last few years, TSA's partnerships with state DMVs, Apple, Google, Samsung and others have paved the way to create a standard for states to securely provision mobile driver's licenses (mDL) to travelers' phones. These mDLs can now be securely presented at TSA checkpoints instead of physical IDs, and even used for other transactions. This public-private partnership model is ripe for use in additional arenas.

Several of the technology providers TSA works with for mDLs also provide wayfinding solutions that many travelers use daily — from driving and walking to riding a train or metro. This is another area where TSA, airports, airlines and technology providers could agree on a standard, then test and deploy end to end wayfinding through existing applications — complete with real-time wait times similar to current traffic-based drive times. Some airline apps already include interactive airport mapping and wayfinding for bag drop, check-in, checkpoints, lounges and departure gates.

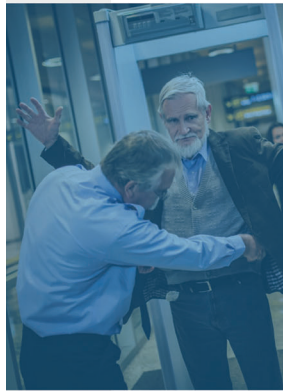
Similarly, TSA has worked with Seattle-Tacoma International Airport (SEA) and other airports on screening appointment windows.<sup>20</sup> If TSA and its partners can ensure that systems are interoperable, these tools could be just one offering available through the traveler's preferred app — Apple or Google Maps, an airline app or the myTSA app.





Each of these examples represents opportunities now and in the future to promote a more integrated, autonomous and seamless process while ensuring traveler privacy and control. Providing predictability to travelers can lead to major improvements in efficiency and the travel experience while mitigating the security risk of large crowds at airports.

## 2. ENHANCING PASSENGER SCREENING AND PROCESSING



Improving identity verification alone without addressing the physical screening process will not reduce long wait times or improve the overall travel experience. In addition, bad actors have attempted to carry threat items on their person for decades, pushing TSA to deploy Advanced Imaging Technology (AIT) in addition to walk-through metal detectors. Until AIT and alarm resolution technology deployment is complete, legacy metal detectors for non-low risk passengers will present security gaps and can lead to unpleasant, time-consuming physical pat-downs of passengers.

**RECOMMENDATION: Congress must increase funding for the procurement of next generation Advanced Imaging Technology (AIT) and alarm resolution technology by \$1 billion over the next five years to improve on-person screening and significantly reduce the need for traveler pat-downs.**

AIT screens for both metallic and non-metallic items, providing greater protection against security risks and enabling automatic detection and alarm resolution of potential threat items.

According to TSA: Millimeter wave advanced imaging technology safely screens passengers without physical contact for metallic and non-metallic threats, including weapons and explosives, which may be concealed under clothing.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to improving security, Next generation AIT also reduces the likelihood of physical pat-downs by automatically identifying the potential threat item and location. Next generation AITs in conjunction with alarm resolution technology would enable TSA to consider modifying or lifting requirements to remove shoes, belts and jackets depending on specific threats and the ability of the technology to distinguish and resolve any false alarms from these items.

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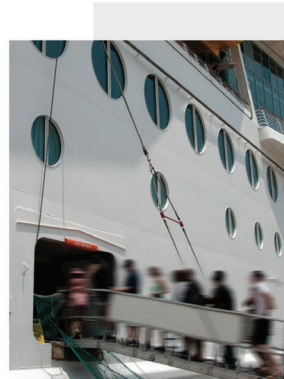
**RECOMMENDATION: Congress should reauthorize and expand TSA's pilot authority for the reimbursable screening services program (RSSP) to allow additional locations for offsite or off-airport partnerships, which will improve operational efficiency and reduce congestion at airport security checkpoints.**

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TSA has set an internal goal to keep wait times under 10 minutes for TSA PreCheck lanes and under 30 minutes for standard screening lanes. More progress must be made to maintain or even lower these wait times in the face of unprecedented travel volume.

Congress authorized a pilot program allowing TSA to enter reimbursable screening services program (RSSP) agreements with TSA regulated entities to provide screening services outside primary passenger terminal screening areas. Three RSSP locations are currently operating, two at LAX and one at ATL.<sup>22</sup> TSA is authorized to have up to eight locations through FY 2025.<sup>23</sup>

TSA should work with airports, airlines and lounges, as well as non-aviation entities like seaports, cruise lines, major destinations and convention centers to expand this program. Offsite screening could be an important option for travelers looking to avoid crowded checkpoints by leveraging private lounge screening or regional airport capabilities, but also for those travelers departing cruise ships, conventions or major destinations seeking a more efficient screening process before reaching the airport. These opportunities can both enhance the traveler experience and provide major operational relief to TSA and airports.



### 3. STRENGTHENING CARRY-ON BAGGAGE SCREENING CAPABILITIES

Investments in modern security technology can also address the major risk that carry-on baggage and accessible property present to aviation security. From the 2006 liquids plot to the 2017 laptop plot, terrorists and bad actors have long sought to exploit baggage vulnerabilities. Yet due to funding challenges, TSA still uses outdated two-dimensional (2-D) x-ray scanners in many airports, creating unnecessary security vulnerabilities.

**Leading-edge Computed Tomography (CT) x-ray technology, which is similar to technology already utilized for checked baggage, provides much greater visibility into baggage, automates detection of threats and reduces unnecessary bag searches.**

However, according to recent testimony, TSA will not fully deploy CT scanners across the aviation system until 2042 at the current funding and procurement rate.<sup>24</sup> This extended timeline allows other countries to leap far ahead of the U.S. in terms of security technology. For example, the U.K. requires all British airports to fully deploy CT by the summer of 2025.<sup>25</sup>

The U.S. must be a leader, not a laggard, in advanced CT technology. To take full advantage of the security and efficiency opportunities, such as automated threat detection, TSA must reach full deployment of CT far more quickly. By working closely with technology manufacturers, leveraging an Open Architecture approach with the CT hardware and undertaking joint testing of software with international partners, TSA should be able to deploy advanced algorithms that can automatically detect prohibited items and non-metallics, enabling travelers to keep all items in their bags and eventually carry liquids over 100ml.



**RECOMMENDATION:** Congress must increase funding for Computed Tomography (CT) baggage scanners, software development for automatic detection and alarm resolution technology by \$2 billion over the next five years. This would significantly enhance bag screening capabilities and efficiencies, while providing major opportunities to improve the traveler experience by allowing more items to remain in bags and larger liquids through the checkpoint.

To date, TSA has deployed 894 CT units at 236 airports nationwide.

According to TSA: CT is the latest checkpoint X-ray scanning equipment to enhance threat detection capabilities for carry-on baggage. The technology is similar to CT technology used in the medical field and...[it] applies sophisticated algorithms for the detection of explosives and other threats by creating a 3-D image that can be viewed and rotated 360 degrees for a thorough analysis.<sup>26</sup>



When properly utilized, CT technology is more accurate and efficient than outdated 2-D systems. It also reduces the load on TSA officers, allowing them to focus attention on flagged bags and secondary screening of potential threat items rather than every bag that comes through the checkpoint.

Maximizing the full capabilities of CT is critical to experiencing all the benefits the technology has to offer. The hardware provides enhanced 3-D imaging and manipulation features that greatly improve security effectiveness. But these are only part of the benefits of CT. Software capabilities enable artificial intelligence to automatically detect threat items like weapons and their components, as well as non-metallic items like liquids and powders — a major security advancement. Automated detection not only elevates CT's security effectiveness even beyond what the 3-D imaging provides, it also creates dramatic improvements in operational efficiency.



TSA has experienced some efficiency issues with CT, but this is mainly due to passenger familiarity and officer training challenges as well as a lack of automatic threat detection. Deploying more CTs across the aviation system — combined with advanced algorithms, passenger familiarity and additional officer training — will yield better security and efficiency results. Heathrow Airport officials told the commission during a June 2024 field visit that the airport is seeing nearly 220 passengers per hour successfully pass through lanes utilizing CT — a much higher throughput number than in the U.S. This promising sign should encourage Congress and TSA to continue investing heavily in this game-changing technology.

TSA should also evaluate solutions like remote baggage screening and viewing — similar to checked baggage screening — to improve throughput as well as officer effectiveness and experience. Such initiatives are likely to address challenges associated with growing travel volume and limited airport infrastructure, especially at checkpoints.

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**RECOMMENDATION: TSA should leverage Open Architecture across capability areas to rapidly develop, test and deploy solutions that allow for a significant increase in security effectiveness and operational efficiency at the checkpoint.**

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Open Architecture (OA) is one of the most effective ways to incorporate advanced software algorithms into transportation security technology.

According to TSA: Open Architecture is a design approach ... to allow a wide range of industry partners to create improved subcomponents (like new detection algorithms, user interfaces, or reporting systems).<sup>27</sup>

In other words, OA ensures that vendors, including original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) and third parties, design equipment in a way that enables interoperability with solutions from other entities to provide a platform for continuous improvements. This generates faster modernization of technology to respond to emerging

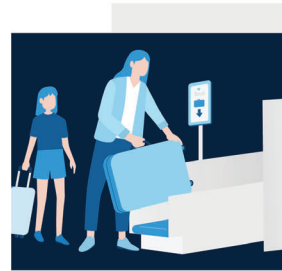


threats and implement customer experience enhancements by allowing the adoption of a new and innovative platform or software without having to completely replace hardware systems.

OA facilitates flexibility, interoperability and modularity across different technology systems. It allows non-traditional entities like third party developers to engage in the improvement cycles with lower risk and up-front investment (i.e. a lower barrier to entry). It also fosters innovation and increases TSA's ability to adopt emerging technologies to provide best-in-class security. Under OA, an artificial intelligence (AI) company could develop a detection algorithm for TSA's transportation security equipment that improves its capabilities. This allows implementation of capabilities that did not exist when the equipment was first developed — a major leap forward in innovation.

The commission commends TSA for working with international partners and technology providers to advance OA across the transportation security system, including in the emerging digital ID ecosystem and in developing automatic threat detection for CT bag scanners.<sup>28</sup>

**By prioritizing OA for CT equipment, TSA can increase opportunities for enhanced algorithm development, opening an avenue for better detection of prohibited metallic and non-metallic items while allowing passengers to leave items in their bags and carry larger liquids.**



#### 4. ADDRESSING FUNDING AND MANAGEMENT ISSUES

While TSA's overall budget has increased in recent years, additional funding has mostly focused on the workforce rather than technology investment. In fact, technology appropriations have remained stagnant or even been reduced. For example, the FY25 President's Budget requests **\$40 million less** for security technology, including reductions for CT scanners, CAT systems and research and development.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, much of the Passenger Security Fee from traveler airfare purchases is diverted from TSA to the Treasury's general fund rather than reinvested in aviation security, which was its intended purpose after 9/11. TSA's internal acquisition processes can compound the challenges stemming from technology underfunding.

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**RECOMMENDATION:** Congress must take legislative action to immediately end the Passenger Security Fee diversion, returning it to TSA as a supplement rather than an offset for appropriations. This represents over \$5 billion in additional TSA funding over five years — resources desperately needed to invest in technology that advances secure and seamless travel.

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The commission commends Congress and TSA's recent investments in frontline workers, who have been underpaid for far too long. Recent evidence that retention and morale continue to improve support this investment.<sup>30</sup> It also suggests that Congress and TSA now have the flexibility to focus on technology and innovative security investments, which are still woefully underfunded.

Following 9/11, Congress passed the Aviation and Transportation Security Act (ATSA), which established TSA and created a Passenger Security Fee on each airline ticket purchase. This fee — currently \$5.60 per one-way trip — was intended to help finance aviation security.<sup>31</sup>

Yet, this fee has not kept pace with inflation and is now wholly insufficient to meet the nation's aviation security needs. To make matters worse, the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2013 diverted approximately one-third of Passenger Security Fees to the general fund of the Treasury for unrelated government spending. In 2018, Congress extended this diversion through FY 2027 — creating a \$5 billion hole in aviation security spending unless current law is changed.

The FY 2024 DHS appropriations bill helped alleviate some of this diversion by transferring \$800 million of the fee to the TSA budget, but as an offset. Reducing TSA appropriations by the commensurate fee amount is not a solution.

**Congress must find other sources for deficit reduction that do not undermine national security. The Passenger Security Fee should be reinvested in aviation security to supplement current appropriations, not replace them.**

The additional \$5 billion to be gained over five years from ending the fee diversion could complete the major technology programs prioritized above — Credential Authentication Technology for identity verification, Advanced Imaging Technology for on-person screening and Computed Tomography for carry-on baggage. It could also serve as an annual technology investment for TSA to conduct research and development as well as necessary maintenance on transportation security equipment.

Lastly, the Passenger Security Fee must undergo a thorough review to allow Congress, TSA and aviation stakeholders to develop a transparent, collaborative and consistent fee structure based on security needs, travel volume and performance metrics like wait time standards.

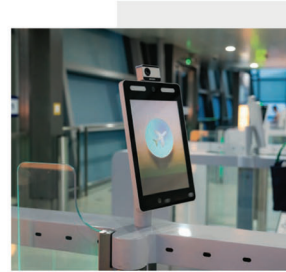
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**RECOMMENDATION: The TSA Administrator should immediately initiate an internal review and issue a new management directive to establish an agency-wide risk appetite for innovation and improve key functions such as IT, acquisition and contracting to ensure the agency updates its management processes, authority mechanisms and timelines for technology deployment.**

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Federal acquisition and procurement processes can be lengthy and cumbersome. TSA's processes are no exception. Vendors can spend months or even years trying to qualify for and win a contract. The process for getting on the TSA Qualified Products List (QPL) is rigorous, time-consuming and expensive. This discourages technology vendors, frustrates industry partners and allows countries around the world to incorporate innovative technology ahead of the U.S.

Deploying technology that is ready to be safely used at airports and effective at mitigating security risk should certainly be a top priority for TSA, but internal requirements should not be so stringent that innovative technology rarely meets those requirements or gets deployed in a timely manner — especially when legacy technology is less effective than modern technology.



• • • • •  
**TSA must prioritize innovation across program offices to drive solutions at the pace of technical change.**





The commission commends TSA for creating additional pathways to innovation for piloting, testing and deploying technologies. Compelling examples include piloting biometric capabilities like PreCheck Touchless ID with airline partners, developing the Capability Acceptance Process to accept transportation security equipment gifted from aviation partners,<sup>32</sup> and creating the Innovation Checkpoint at Las Vegas McCarran International Airport (LAS) to enable operational testing and evaluation of emerging security technology.

However, these are standalone examples, not a permanent solution. Stakeholders repeatedly told the commission that TSA must improve its transition structure, funding and scalability to improve the success rate of pilots that become operational capabilities. Going forward, TSA must integrate its systems and leverage its data assets to enhance security and efficiency through a more agile approach to capability development.

When founding TSA, Congress envisioned an agency with the ability to respond nimbly and flexibly to emerging and dynamic security threats. That approach should also apply to internal agency processes like acquisition and procurement given the critical role that technology and automation play in improving security effectiveness.

The commission finds that the three biggest hurdles in improving internal agency processes include:

- 1) inconsistent risk appetite across program offices;
- 2) a lack of transition structure and funding to scale projects past the pilot phase into operational capabilities; and
- 3) an outdated IT infrastructure challenged to support major technology deployments and system connectivity.

It is paramount that TSA leadership address these hurdles and work with Congress to identify additional authority and funding needs to do so.



## 5. EMBRACING INTERNATIONAL INNOVATIVE OPPORTUNITIES

The difference between domestic airports is confusing enough for travelers, but that confusion is amplified even more when comparing international airports and aviation systems. Different structures, requirements and operations create inefficiencies and degrade the traveler experience, while leading to inconsistent security outcomes around the world. It is highly unlikely that the global aviation system will ever be completely uniform, but there are ample opportunities to help harmonize technology, standards and security outcomes.

To capitalize on these opportunities, the U.S. should lead an international coalition to align technology standards and testing; jointly enhance screening measures; and achieve comparable security results across multiple countries. These efforts could generate major operational efficiencies and passenger benefits by streamlining processes, providing consistency across global aviation and reducing duplicative or unnecessary requirements that do not improve security outcomes.

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**RECOMMENDATION:** The U.S. should reach formal agreements with key international partners over the next three years on common technology standards and testing to allow passengers to experience efficiencies across international aviation systems.

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As discussed above, modern security technology like CT offers major opportunities for automated threat detection. Combining research, standards and testing efforts from international partners multiplies these opportunities.

The commission commends TSA for initiating such efforts with key European partners and encourages continued cooperation. Harmonizing the standards and testing of common technology provides consistency for travelers and offers opportunities to reach comparable security outcomes across different aviation systems — ultimately enabling international travelers to be treated as domestic travelers for purposes of security measures.

This lack of harmonization can have a real impact on travelers.

In June 2024, the U.K. allowed airports to remove the 100ml liquid requirement due to confidence in automated detection capabilities of their CT scanners. The U.S. did not follow along because it lacked the same confidence in the performance of the existing automated detection capabilities and does not have CT deployed across the U.S. aviation system. Once the legitimate concerns about the effectiveness of the detection technology were shared, the U.K. reinstated the 100ml liquid requirement, creating massive confusion and chaos at some U.K. airports.<sup>33</sup> With harmonized standards and testing in place, this entire issue could have been avoided.

#### NEED FOR COMMON TECHNOLOGY STANDARDS

Ideally in the future, the U.S. and close partners like the U.K. will reach common technology standards for CT algorithms that can automatically detect liquid threats after jointly testing the technology and improving its detection capability. This will allow countries to move in tandem on reforms like relaxing the 100ml liquids requirement. The result will be a more coordinated international aviation system, elevating security around the world and improving traveler expectations and experience.

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**RECOMMENDATION:** Congress should provide longer-term reauthorization of One-Stop Security pilot authority so TSA can execute at least five formal agreements with key international partners over the next five years to enable streamlined security processes for international travelers and their bags.

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The One-Stop Security (OSS) program, authorized by Congress for its current pilot phase, creates opportunities for streamlined security processes where comparable security exists among different aviation systems and airports.

#### ONE STOP SECURITY IS CRITICAL

The end goal of OSS is to allow international transferring passengers to make connecting flights without being rescreened by domestic security. This creates a major transformation in international travel — raising security standards in foreign countries, reducing connection times in the U.S., enabling more international inbound flights and vastly improving the travel experience by avoiding redundant screening.

The commission commends TSA for working with multiple international partners as well as U.S. and foreign carriers and airports to seek OSS agreements. However, multiple aviation stakeholders expressed concerns to the commission about slow progress and rigid requirements stemming from negotiations between the U.S. and foreign governments as well as unclear business requirements for participating stakeholders. It is evident that the aviation industry is eager to support the implementation of OSS and recognizes the potential benefits and opportunities to showcase American leadership in aviation security, efficiency and the travel experience.

For OSS to maximize benefits to travelers, airports and airlines, the U.S. and its foreign counterparts need to take



a more flexible, innovative approach without sacrificing security. This requires prioritizing security outcomes, rather than identical processes. Congress must also commit to longer-term authorization and scaling of OSS to make stakeholder investments worthwhile.

TSA is working with U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) but the commission notes that the coordination between these two DHS agencies must improve to advance OSS. CBP would likely have to divert officers to a separate, OSS-only customs area or directly to the arrival gates to prevent the comingling of travelers in the international arrivals hall. This diversion could impact general airport customs if CBP has fewer officers to process non-OSS travelers. Additionally, airports would likely have to make infrastructure changes to limit comingling upon arrival. This imposes a cost to airports that should be supported by data demonstrating additional value in terms of throughput, growth, traveler experience and security, as well as the certainty that stems from a longer-term program.



A key milestone to OSS is International to Domestic Baggage Data Screening (I2D), where international travelers arriving in the U.S. would not have to recheck their bags for a domestic connection. The airline or departing airport would share the bag screening images with TSA and CBP, providing an advanced look at the images to determine any potential threats in route to the U.S. Under current non-OSS operations, TSA and CBP would not see those bags

until they reach a U.S. airport, so this advanced screening provides a major boost for security and efficiency.

The commission supports advancing I2D as part of OSS or even separately while full OSS for passengers continues to be worked out with a partner country.

**However, the commission recommends that any bag image and data sharing process be agreed upon before implementing OSS to mitigate any data privacy liability concerns, especially in light of major privacy legislation such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).**

## CONCLUSION

TSA faces critical challenges in its mission to secure the nation's transportation systems. The commission's recommendations provide a strategic roadmap for TSA to enhance its capabilities and effectiveness, vastly improving both security and the travel experience.

These changes can yield significant benefits. Enhancing aviation security through advanced technologies could prevent potential security threats and save lives. Improving operational efficiency to reduce wait times could generate billions in additional annual visitor spending at U.S. businesses.

**Optimizing resources through automation and risk-based screening could allow TSA to refocus a significant portion of its workforce on high-risk areas and complex security tasks — improving the officer experience and providing greater value to American taxpayers.**

Implementing these recommendations will require concerted effort and collaboration among various stakeholders, including Congress, TSA leadership, private sector partners and the traveling public. With sustained commitment, adequate resources and strong partnerships, TSA can ensure secure and efficient travel for generations to come while contributing significantly to U.S. economic growth and enhancing America's competitive position in global travel.





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## Endnotes for Transforming Aviation Security

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Transportation Security Administration, "TSA checkpoint travel numbers (current year versus prior year/same weekday)," <https://www.tsa.gov/travel/passenger-volumes>

<sup>2</sup> CBS News, "More than 300 passengers tried to evade airport security in the last year, TSA says," April 5, 2024. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/tsa-airport-security-passengers-evade/>

<sup>3</sup> News Nation, "Al-Qaeda affiliate threatens attacks on airlines and prominent figures," January 1, 2024. <https://www.newsnationnow.com/world/al-qaeda-affiliate-threatens-airlines-prominent-figures/>

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Transportation Security Administration, "TSA checkpoint travel numbers (current year versus prior year/same weekday)," <https://www.tsa.gov/travel/passenger-volumes>

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Travel Association, "Stunning New Research Ranks United States Nearly Dead Last In Competition For Global Travelers," January 20, 2024. <https://www.ustravel.org/press/stunning-new-research-ranks-united-states-nearly-dead-last-competition-global-travelers>

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Transportation Security Administration, "A Review of Fiscal Year 2025 Budget Request for Transportation Security Administration," May 15, 2024. <https://www.tsa.gov/news/press/testimony/2024/05/15/review-fiscal-year-2025-budget-request-transportation-security>

<sup>7</sup> Business Travel News Europe, "UK Airports Granted Extension to Install New Security Scanners," June 12, 2024. <https://www.businesstravelnewseurope.com/Air-Travel/UK-airports-granted-extension-to-install-new-security-scanners>

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# Modernizing Airport Customs and Borders

## INTRODUCTION

**U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) has been an innovation leader within the Department of Homeland Security and the federal government, setting a benchmark for security, traveler experience and facilitation. Over the past decade, CBP has transformed its operations through programs such as Global Entry, Biometric Entry/Exit, and Mobile Passport Control (MPC).**

CBP plays a critical role in processing international visitors and returning American citizens. As the U.S. strives to regain market share in global travel, improving the overall traveler experience has become increasingly crucial amid rising demand. Improving the CBP officer experience goes hand-in-hand with improving the traveler experience, all the while ensuring the security and efficiency of the nation's borders. As CBP's most valuable asset, these officers represent a significant investment in training and expertise, equipping them to facilitate lawful trade and travel while enforcing immigration and customs laws. Their hands-on experience provides critical insights into operational challenges, emerging threats and effective strategies. The commission's recommendations aim to support CBP officers in the enforcement of our nation's laws and fulfilling CBP's border, trade, travel and national security missions.

CBP's indispensable role has become even more essential as travel volumes surge.



**In fiscal year 2024, CBP processed over 140 million travelers at our nation's airports, surpassing 2019's mark of 135.7 million.<sup>1</sup>**



CBP's commitment to innovation will be crucial in managing surging traveler volume. The agency's track record of transformation over the past decade creates a strong foundation for continued improvement.

CBP's leadership in biometric technologies has revolutionized how travelers move through U.S. borders. CBP's facial recognition platform, the Traveler Verification Service (TVS), was a pivotal moment in border security. Expanding the Biometric Entry/Exit program will expedite the process for millions of international visitors and fortify national security by ensuring individuals are accurately identified.

Similarly, implementing Mobile Passport Control (MPC) was an innovative leap in simplifying the customs and immigration process. MPC allows eligible travelers to submit their travel documents, photos and customs declaration information through a free, secure app. MPC streamlines the traveler's entry into the U.S. by reducing passport control inspection time and overall wait time. The MPC program shows how leveraging technology can create a more efficient and traveler-friendly border-crossing experience.

The commission applauds CBP's ongoing discussions with airports. The agency's proactive approach continues to drive advances benefiting both the public and private

sectors, fostering economic growth and enhancing border security. The commission supports CBP's continued efforts to advance innovative programs for travelers including the proposed Seamless Border Entry (SBE) and Enhanced Passenger Processing (EPP) process.

SBE, an extension of CBP's Trusted Traveler initiatives, aims to further streamline the entry process by using facial biometrics "on the move" to verify the identities of Global Entry travelers entering the United States.

**SBE marks the first time that a security agency has effectively eliminated the friction points in its processes while maintaining the highest standards of security.**

SBE can become a global model for border management, alleviating the congestion of the current identity verification system. The commission encourages CBP to expand this process.

EPP continues to expand facilitation opportunities to other risk-segmented international arrival passengers. Under EPP, U.S. citizens are processed through streamlined queuing using facial capture technology instead of the traditional manual facial capture in booth processing upon arrival. This approach aims to improve operational efficiency and reduce staffing impacts as travel volumes continue to increase. In the near term, the goal is to support the development of a pilot for U.S. citizens arriving internationally at major U.S. gateways. In the medium term, the objective is to expand EPP to include lawful permanent residents, certain nationals exempt from U.S. visas and foreign nationals from Visa Waiver Program (VWP) countries, further streamlining the entry process and enhancing overall border security.

The commission's recommendations aim to build on CBP's legacy of international engagement, strong partnerships and important innovations, addressing challenges posed by continued growth in international travel to the U.S. By presenting targeted solutions, the commission seeks to support CBP in its mission to further enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of border processing. Both the commission and CBP share the goal of enhancing national security and driving greater economic prosperity while delivering a superior experience for all travelers.



## KEY CHALLENGES

### 1. ECONOMIC IMPACT OF PROCESSING DELAYS

Delays and inefficiencies in processing travelers can significantly reduce traveler spending, dealing a severe blow to the U.S. economy. During peak travel seasons, airports such as JFK and LAX often experience processing delays exceeding one hour, leading to missed connections and dissatisfied travelers.<sup>2</sup>

### 2. BALANCING SECURITY AND EFFICIENCY

Balancing the need for efficient processing with maintaining rigorous security presents a constant challenge for CBP. The commission acknowledges that CBP continues to face emerging and growing threats to the United States.

### 3. TRAVELER EXPERIENCE AND SATISFACTION

Long wait times and cumbersome processes negatively impact traveler satisfaction, potentially deterring future visits. A 2021 survey by the International Air Transport Association (IATA) found that 67% of travelers cited long wait times as a primary concern, significantly affecting their overall travel experience.<sup>3</sup> Travelers have reported waiting up to two hours for passport control during peak times, leading to frustration and negative reviews.<sup>4</sup>

### 4. INFRASTRUCTURE LIMITATIONS

Airport infrastructure, including limited space, signage, wayfinding and baggage operations, significantly impacts international arrivals and can limit the value of CBP's innovative approaches. Under ideal circumstances, CBP may process travelers faster than bags can be delivered to the baggage carousels. Baggage operations may be affected by factors including competing baggage companies, outdated baggage systems and a limited number of carousels.

### 5. COMPETITIVE POSITIONING

Other countries are advancing faster in streamlining border processes, potentially making them more attractive destinations and challenging the U.S.'s position in global travel. Singapore's Changi Airport, known for its seamless



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**Singapore's Changi Airport is frequently rated as the best airport in the world.**

immigration processes, is frequently rated as the best airport in the world, attracting a high volume of international travelers.<sup>5</sup>

### **OVERARCHING CHALLENGE: ENSURING EFFECTIVE PRIVACY AND OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCY**

As CBP continues to innovate and enhance its border management capabilities, it confronts a broader challenge that impacts multiple operations: balancing the need for operational efficiency with the imperative of protecting traveler privacy. This challenge requires careful consideration as the agency moves forward with technological advancements and process improvements.

The commission recognizes that both government and industry stakeholders share the goals of ensuring traveler privacy and safety. We see these goals as complementary, not mutually exclusive. Given CBP's instrumental role in the travel process, its approach to this challenge will significantly impact the future of border security and traveler experience.

## **SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **1. ADDRESSING CBP OFFICER STAFFING SHORTAGES**

CBP is facing a critical staffing shortage that has significant implications for national security and economic efficiency.

**Currently, CBP's workload staffing model shows it is already short 5,850 officers needed to facilitate trade and travel.<sup>6</sup>**

According to a recent Department of Homeland Security Inspector General Report, "a large number of officers will reach their law enforcement retirement in 2028.<sup>7</sup> At that time, and in subsequent years, retirements could rise yet neither component has a succession plan addressing possible rapid personnel changes."

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**RECOMMENDATION: Congress must provide funding for 2,000 additional CBP officers at airports of entry.**

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To enhance border security and facilitate lawful trade and travel, Congress should appropriate funding for an additional 2,000 CBP officers above the authorized staffing level, with a focus on supporting our nation's airports. Current staffing shortages at airports hinder CBP's ability to efficiently process travelers and cargo, creating delays and potential security vulnerabilities.

**Increasing CBP personnel will strengthen national security, improve airport efficiency and support economic growth by ensuring the smooth flow of international travelers and goods.**

Additional officers can also help extend operational hours, accommodating the growth of new international routes and improving overall service at U.S. entry points. This investment is essential to addressing the operational demands at our nation's gateway airports.




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**RECOMMENDATION: CBP should seek to further boost CBP officer levels with support from willing private sector partners.**

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Opening a new port of entry or terminal, regardless of technology improvements, will always require new officers above the authorized staffing levels. Airports across the U.S. continue to invest in new international terminals to take advantage of the economic benefits to their city and state from drawing additional travelers.

A public-private partnership approach can help provide resources to strengthen CBP staffing levels. This would require congressional appropriations and authorizing committees to work collaboratively with CBP, allowing private sector partners to provide funding for staffing above the authorized staffing levels.

However, the commission is concerned that CBP's existing Reimbursable Services Program (RSP) already places significant financial strain on U.S. airports and airlines, including for services such as overtime outside normal business hours needed to process growing international air service. At many airports, CBP officers have reached the maximum amount of overtime they can work and additional private sector funding cannot be used to increase services. Therefore, it is critical that CBP consistently review its



staffing model to ensure it reflects projected growth in international travel and that Congress authorizes and fully funds CBP staffing at adequate levels to support CBP's staffing model.

## 2. ENHANCING TRAVELER PROCESSING

Inefficiencies and delays in manually processing travelers create barriers to further travel and economic growth. By harnessing advanced technologies, such as biometric screening and artificial intelligence, airports and border security agencies can significantly streamline traveler processing, enhance risk assessment and optimize resource allocation. Implementing these innovative technologies improves the overall efficiency of travel operations and contributes to a more secure and seamless travel experience for passengers.

Biometric technologies have emerged as crucial tools for enhancing efficiency, security and traveler satisfaction. Continued implementation of biometric systems, such as facial recognition, offers a transformative solution to longstanding challenges in traveler processing. These technologies streamline operations, reduce wait times and bolster security by providing rapid, accurate identification of travelers. To harness these benefits, a strategic expansion of biometric entry and exit systems is essential.

### **RECOMMENDATION: CBP should expand Enhanced Passenger Processing (EPP) to the top 25 airports by the end of 2026.**

CBP is currently deploying "Enhanced Passenger Processing" (EPP) for U.S. citizens in partnership with airports — delivering important benefits to CBP and the traveler. EPP's resource savings and increased efficiency should enable airports to explore the addition of more flights.

Under EPP, U.S. citizens are processed via facial comparison technology using tablets mounted on adjustable stands versus being processed at a booth. Under EPP, the biometric technology fully automates the Simplified Arrival (entry) process and the CBP officers focus on the traveler interaction. Additionally, airports provide facial comparison

#### **BENEFITS OF ENHANCED PASSENGER PROCESSING (EPP)**

First, because officers are focused on the traveler versus manual processing at a booth, this allows CBP to apply more resources to higher risk individuals and monitor for suspicious travel patterns. Second, for the traveler, EPP provides a better, more frictionless experience by processing at a tablet which can take 4-6 seconds versus at a booth which can take anywhere from 30-60 seconds.



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**Congress must address this lagging progress once and for all by funding the completion of CBP's biometric air exit system, which will vastly improve CBP's border security and immigration enforcement capabilities by knowing who is entering and exiting the country and when.**

technology (hardware and software) to support EPP — similar to the Automated Passport Control (AP) self-service kiosks used to expedite the customs and immigration process. Every airport has a different demographic profile of its arriving travelers which drives the tools the airport and CBP choose to invest in, such as the number of lanes assigned to Global Entry travelers.

Significantly expanding the EPP biometric entry process at U.S. gateway airports can enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of processing U.S. citizens entering the United States. This expansion will enable officers to quickly and accurately process low-risk travelers, ensuring a smoother entry experience and better allocation of resources to focus on high-risk threats.

- The commission recommends that all U.S. citizens be eligible for EPP, provided there is no impact to CBP's border or national security missions.
- The commission recommends that CBP leverage EPP technology to include "on the move" biometric capture to improve both the traveler and officer experiences.
- The commission also recommends that CBP identify a federal funding source to pay for EPP technology and work in partnership with individual airports to identify the best way to invest those funds.

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**RECOMMENDATION: Congress should support the Biometric Entry/Exit Program by investing \$600 million to complete CBP's biometric air exit system within two years and enhance the Traveler Verification Service (TVS).**

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The commission applauds CBP's work to fully implement the original vision of the 9/11 Commission for 100% biometric screening of outbound U.S. air travelers, especially absent the requisite funding from Congress. Integrity in our nation's entry-exit systems is critical to driving innovation for cross border travel. The commission strongly supports CBP's efforts to achieve 97% biometric coverage of all departing flights, but the current pace of biometric technology deployment will delay the completion well past the 2025 goal.



While the airport and airline community are not statutorily compelled to biometrically verify the exit of travelers, they have contributed technology and operational support to assist CBP. The commission recognizes that travelers increasingly demand a biometrically enabled travel journey and the cost of data sharing and technology has dramatically declined.

The commission commends airports and airlines for supporting CBP in its biometric exit mission. Collectively, airline and airport investments in biometric technology are strengthening border security and facilitating a better boarding experience. But the aviation industry should not be forced to pay for a requirement that Congress put on CBP.

Congress originally funded CBP's biometric exit program through fees attached to the H-1B and L-1 visas. The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) developed the original fee collection estimate of \$1 billion, but as of the end of Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 just over \$380 million has been collected. CBP estimates a total collection of \$431 million by the end of fiscal year 2027. COVID impacted this with a shift to telework, which remains in many industries that were bringing in these types of workers, so the fee amounts are not expected to get back to anywhere near the original expected collections. Additionally, the authority to collect these fees ends in FY 2028 as the program was expected to operationalize biometrics across all environments by that time.

CBP's Traveler Verification Service (TVS) continues to serve as a critical backbone to CBP's biometric programs, providing proven, secure and seamless crossing experiences for travelers in the air, land and sea environments. Additionally, TVS has been leveraged to support other agencies including the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), which has leveraged TVS to provide faster, more efficient identity verification at the checkpoint in partnership with airlines.

### **3. INCREASING INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL TO THE U.S.**

Fostering partnerships and collaboration among various stakeholders will help CBP enhance the efficiency, security and overall experience of international travel. Working



together, airports, airlines and regulatory bodies can implement innovative solutions that streamline processes, reduce barriers and ensure a seamless journey for travelers.

The following recommendations focus on expanding international collaboration programs, supporting the growth of international-to-domestic baggage data screening pilots and modernizing the visa process through transparent collaboration between the U.S. and EU.

One example is the opportunity to align Visa Waiver Program (VWP) membership with participation in Global Entry. VWP allows citizens of participating countries to travel to the U.S. for tourism or business without obtaining a visa for stays of up to 90 days. To be eligible, travelers must have a valid Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA) approval prior to their departure. Similar to the Global Entry Program, VWP requires countries to meet specific security and information sharing standards. It also facilitates smoother and faster travel, boosting tourism and business exchanges between the U.S. and participating nations.




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**RECOMMENDATION: CBP should extend Global Entry to Visa Waiver Program countries and include Global Entry as part of future VWP negotiations.**

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VWP is negotiated between the U.S. and eligible partner countries to enhance international travel and strengthen security measures. These negotiations focus on aligning both parties' standards for passport security, information sharing and counterterrorism initiatives. Partner countries must meet specific requirements, including a low visa refusal rate, robust law enforcement collaboration and stringent border management. Successful negotiations result in mutually beneficial agreements that facilitate streamlined travel while maintaining high levels of security and compliance with U.S. immigration laws.

Similarly, CBP's Global Entry program agreements are negotiated through bilateral discussions between the U.S. and partner countries. These negotiations focus on ensuring mutual trust in security standards, aligning

operational procedures and protecting personal data. This would enable eligible travelers from participating nations to access streamlined customs and immigration processing. Partnerships are formalized through agreements that outline roles, responsibilities and compliance requirements.

There is little reason to separate these negotiations.

**The established bilateral framework between the U.S. and each VWP country creates a solid foundation for introducing Global Entry, as both programs focus on enhancing security and efficiency for low-risk travelers.**



By leveraging the VWP's existing relationships and infrastructure, the U.S. can more easily integrate Global Entry into the travel process for these countries, promoting faster customs processing and mutual benefits. This collaboration helps strengthen ties and improve travel experiences between nations.

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**RECOMMENDATION: CBP and the State Department should provide funding to Global Entry partner countries for capabilities that improve U.S. security such as information sharing mechanisms and recurrent vetting of trusted travelers.**

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The U.S. State Department issues grants to foreign countries to combat transnational crime, reduce drug trafficking and strengthen justice systems. The State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs' (INL) funding helps build institutional capacity and fosters international cooperation to address global security challenges. Many of these partnerships support CBP's border and national security missions.

To support Global Entry, partner countries must often upgrade their existing IT infrastructure to support CBP's vetting process. This is often a limiting factor in the expansion of Global Entry. Given that Global Entry supports the U.S. economy and provides significant security benefits, CBP and INL should explore grants that provide funding for current and potential Global Entry partners to upgrade their capabilities and infrastructure to meet and maintain Global Entry requirements, such as information sharing and recurrent vetting of trusted travelers.

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**RECOMMENDATION: CBP should re-open Preclearance applications and negotiations with willing international partners while prioritizing locations where the concerns of U.S. stakeholders can be addressed.**

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Preclearance allows travelers to undergo customs, immigration and aviation security procedures at their point of departure rather than upon arrival in the U.S., reducing congestion and wait times at U.S. airports of entry.<sup>8</sup>



Preclearance represents a unique opportunity to drive more travel to the U.S. and significantly enhance security. By expanding Preclearance to more international airports, the U.S. can improve the efficiency of its border control processes and provide a more convenient experience for travelers. Additionally, foreign airports are required by statute to provide funding for the cost of CBP officers. In this regard, Preclearance provides a valuable path toward supporting growth and international travel to the U.S. without a cost to the taxpayer.

The commission notes this is not feasible for all airports, including some domestic airports where travelers arrive. Additionally, the concerns associated with Preclearance — including the cost to airports, airlines and foreign partners; airport infrastructure limitations; armed law enforcement presence abroad; among others — provide challenges to finalizing new agreements. However, Preclearance may offer opportunities at select foreign airports where these concerns can be addressed and U.S. airports, airlines and the customs process overall could benefit.

For these reasons, the commission recommends that CBP reopen negotiations with key partners with whom it has held advanced discussions — including the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Japan.

The commission also recommends that CBP reopen the Preclearance application process to enhance international traveler convenience and security. By offering additional Preclearance locations, where they are feasible, the U.S. can strengthen its global partnerships while ensuring the highest standards of border security are maintained.

In any future Preclearance negotiations, the commission recommends that CBP address concerns of all relevant U.S. stakeholders before proceeding — including concerns about additional costs to U.S. airlines, CBP's ability to adequately staff U.S. airports of entry and the opportunities for U.S. carriers to benefit from these arrangements.

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**RECOMMENDATION: CBP should partner with TSA, the aviation industry and international partners to expand International to Domestic Baggage Data Screening as part of One-Stop Security.**

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The commission commends efforts by CBP, TSA, airlines and airports to expand the International to Domestic Baggage Data Screening (I2D) pilots. As mentioned previously as part of the larger One-Stop Security initiative, I2D enables the seamless transfer of checked baggage information between international and domestic flights, reducing the need for passengers to recheck their luggage and undergo additional security screenings. By expanding I2D, the government and travel industry can enhance security effectiveness, reduce delays and improve the traveler experience.

The commission believes I2D offers a significant opportunity for systematic change for international travel. By providing advance bag image data to CBP and TSA and reducing the need for multiple security checks, this program can greatly enhance the security and efficiency of international travel — creating a more seamless travel experience and encouraging more international travelers to choose U.S. destinations.

#### **NEED FOR CONSISTENT FRAMEWORK ON PRIVACY AND DATA SHARING**

As automation technologies — for baggage data sharing, advanced passenger information and biometrics — become increasingly integrated into travel processes, privacy and data sharing requirements should be aligned with international partners. Developing a consistent framework will facilitate the secure, efficient exchange of information, enhancing security and improving the travel experience. This alignment will also address privacy concerns, ensuring that data is handled in a manner that respects individual rights while also supporting security objectives.

#### **4. IMPROVING AIRPORT DESIGN**

Inadequate infrastructure and resources currently strain the U.S. government's ability to efficiently process the growing volume of travelers. Rapid technological advancements in key CBP capabilities help reduce the need for expansive arrival halls, which were necessary during previous periods



of significant growth in travel to the U.S. Modernizing the physical and technological infrastructure of airports and ensuring adequate staffing levels will support the seamless processing of passengers and goods.

This section outlines key recommendations to support investment in clear wayfinding and signage, as well as updating airport design standards to better leverage modern technological innovations.

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**RECOMMENDATION:** CBP should partner with the aviation and technology industry to deploy wayfinding capabilities to improve crowd flow and enhance the traveler experience.

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Integrating new wayfinding technologies that go beyond simple signage represents a unique opportunity for the aviation and technology industry to partner with CBP to enhance the traveler experience and optimize efficiency at the international arrivals hall.

Wayfinding is critical for international arrivals at airports, ensuring a seamless and stress-free traveler experience, particularly for those unfamiliar with the language, culture or layout of the airport. Clear and intuitive signage helps travelers navigate customs, immigration, baggage claim and connecting flights efficiently — reducing confusion and delays. Effective wayfinding supports operational efficiency by minimizing bottlenecks and enhancing crowd flow management, while fostering a positive perception of the airport and improving passenger satisfaction and trust.

- The aviation and technology stakeholder community should partner with CBP to identify new technologies that support enhanced wayfinding and leverage CBP's risk segmentation approach through the use of new biometric-driven tools such as EPP, MPC and Global Entry.
- CBP should invest in technologies that support enhanced wayfinding to support airport and CBP staffing efficiency and provide clear communication to the traveler upon arrival.



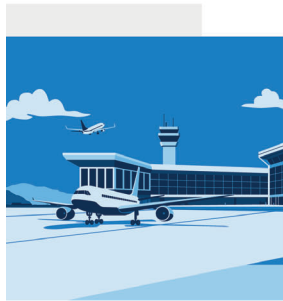
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**RECOMMENDATION: CBP should update airport technical design standards to better inform new terminal development.**

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Modernizing airport technical design standards is essential to integrating technological innovations and adapting to the evolving needs of the travel industry.

**Massive arrival halls are becoming antiquated as biometrics and advanced data collection allow for more efficient, flexible and secure passenger processing. Several airports are investing in new international terminals to take advantage of increasing demand to visit the U.S. by international travelers.**



At the same time, CBP continues to invest in technologies that require smaller footprints, such as EPP and SBE, and focuses on more person-centric vetting and risk segmentation. This requires more flexible airport infrastructure than the rigid standards of the past.

The commission recommends CBP update airport standards to facilitate the integration of new technologies and design concepts that reduce the need for large physical spaces. Design standards should be living documents that support and encourage CBP's evolution. CBP is currently developing an Airport Modernization Strategy. Incorporating that document's goals into CBP's Technical Design Standards would allow airports to build the terminals of tomorrow.

**Moreover, programs that streamline international travel like Preclearance and One-Stop Security can help offset the need for new, expansive facilities and additional CBP officers, so they should inform the design of new international terminals at U.S. airports.**

By enabling more security processing to occur before travelers arrive in the U.S., these programs can alleviate congestion and enhance the overall efficiency of entry procedures.



## CONCLUSION

CBP has demonstrated commendable progress in embracing innovation over the past decade. Programs such as Global Entry, the Reimbursable Services Program and Mobile Passport Control have significantly improved efficiency, security and the traveler experience. However, several challenges remain that need to be addressed to fully capitalize on these advancements.

By accelerating the deployment of technology and automation, promoting partnership and collaboration, opening creative sources of funding infrastructure and resources, and aligning policy and regulation to meet the dynamics to today's international travel market, the commission hopes to support CBP in carrying out its essential mission of enhancing national security and promoting growth in travel and trade. Implementing biometric screening and AI technologies, formalizing collaboration frameworks, investing in modernized facilities and revising outdated policies are essential steps toward achieving these goals.

The policy recommendations outlined in this report provide a clear roadmap for action. Implementing them will yield significant benefits, including:



### 1. INCREASED ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTIONS:

Enhancing travel efficiency could significantly boost tourism and business travel. Even a modest improvement in wait times at major U.S. airports could generate billions in additional annual visitor spending, driving economic growth across various sectors.

- 2. ENHANCED NATIONAL SECURITY:** Implementing advanced processing technologies and procedures can bolster overall security. For instance, adopting state-of-the-art biometric systems can swiftly and accurately identify potential threats, preventing security incidents and safeguarding the nation's borders more effectively.

**3. IMPROVED TRAVELER SATISFACTION:**

Streamlining processes and reducing wait times can dramatically enhance the traveler experience. This improvement not only encourages repeat visits but also strengthens America's reputation as a welcoming destination for international travelers.

**4. STRENGTHENED COMPETITIVE POSITIONING:**

By adopting best practices and innovative technologies, the U.S. can improve its ranking in global travel competitiveness. This enhanced position can drive further economic growth and cement the nation's status as a premier travel destination.

We encourage CBP and all relevant stakeholders to consider our recommendations and work collaboratively to achieve these goals. Together, we can build a future where travel is seamless, secure and beneficial for the economy and society.

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**Endnotes for Modernizing Airport Customs and Borders**

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## Strengthening Visitor Visa Policy

### INTRODUCTION

Under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), foreign nationals possessing a valid nonimmigrant visa may be temporarily admitted to the U.S. for specific purposes and defined periods of time. The INA defines 24 major nonimmigrant visa (NIV) categories, including temporary business (B-1) and leisure (B-2) visas. In addition to the NIV system, the Visa Waiver Program (VWP) allows citizens of designated countries to be admitted to the U.S. for business or leisure for up to 90 days without a visitor visa.

This section of the report focuses on federal laws and policies related to B-1/B-2 (visitor visas) and the VWP. The focus is limited to these areas because:

- **Visitor visas comprise most of the NIVs issued each year.** In FY 2023, 74% (or 7.7 million) of the 10.4 million nonimmigrant visas issued by the U.S. were visitor visas and Border Crossing Cards (BCC).<sup>1</sup>
- **Temporary business and leisure visitors account for most of the nonimmigrants admitted to the U.S. each year.** In FY 2023, 88% (or 59.8 million) of all nonimmigrants admitted to the U.S. were temporary visitors for business or leisure from VWP and non-VWP countries. Of those, 70% were citizens of non-VWP countries and 30% were citizens of VWP countries.<sup>2</sup>



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**Streamlining Visitor Visas is Critical to the U.S. Economy.**

### INTERNATIONAL VISITORS DELIVER MASSIVE ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL BENEFITS

Temporary international visitors to the U.S. deliver vast economic, cultural and national security benefits. Whether visiting historic attractions, touring small towns, hiking through National Parks or attending major sporting events, international visitors grow U.S. exports by purchasing American-made goods and services during their stay. International business travelers maintain and expand U.S. trade relationships, particularly in a global economy where international meetings, conferences, and networking are essential. And international visitation strengthens diplomatic ties and promotes American values, as most visitors leave with a better opinion of American society—making them more likely to support policies that keep America safe and prosperous.<sup>3</sup>



#### BY THE NUMBERS:

In 2023, 66.5 million international visitors spent more than \$213 billion in the U.S. Travel exports accounted for 7% of total U.S. exports and supported 1.6 million American jobs.<sup>4</sup> Prior to the pandemic, in 2019, nearly 80 million international visitors spent \$240 billion in the U.S., which made international visitor spending on American-made goods and services our nation's #1 services export.<sup>5</sup> In a recent survey, more than half (55%) of international visitors to the U.S. said their first-hand experience improved their overall perception of the U.S.<sup>6</sup>

### MITIGATING IMMIGRATION, NATIONAL SECURITY AND OTHER RISKS

Temporarily admitting international visitors to the U.S. also presents some illegal immigration, national security, public health and other risks—making the NIV process a central part of immigration control and border security. For example, each year, a small percentage of NIV applicants are refused a visa due to immigration, national security or criminal concerns. Similarly, a small percentage of nonimmigrant visa holders stay in the U.S. beyond their period of admittance.<sup>7</sup>

**BY THE NUMBERS:****Visa Refusal and Overstay Rates**

- **Visa Refusals:** In FY 2023, the worldwide B-1/B-2 refusal rate was 23%.<sup>8</sup> Of those, the number of refusals due to concerns over:
  - **Intending to immigrate:** 2,219,877 (17%)
  - **Criminal activity:** 11,687 (0.09%)
  - **Terrorism:** 272 (0.002%)<sup>9</sup>
- **Visa Overstays:** In FY 2023, CBP calculated that the total number of nonimmigrant visa overstays was 565,155, or 1.45%, of the 39 million nonimmigrant admissions to the U.S. Of those, overstay rates were:
  - 3.2% for all non-VWP country admissions
  - 0.62% for all VWP country admissions<sup>10</sup>

**THE NEED TO BALANCE SECURITY AND FACILITATION IN VISITOR VISA POLICY**

There are economic and national security costs for failing to prevent dangerous individuals from entering the U.S.<sup>11</sup> However, there are also extraordinary risks to the U.S. economy and its global competitiveness if visitor visa processing is overly restrictive, inefficient and unnecessarily deters qualified foreign nationals from obtaining a visa and visiting the U.S.<sup>12</sup>

**BY THE NUMBERS:**

After the 9/11 attacks, international visits dropped significantly, resulting in a decrease in visitor spending in the U.S. of \$25 billion over a two-year period, which led to the loss of more than 227,000 American jobs.<sup>13</sup> A 2004 study found that visa delays cost U.S. exporters more than \$30 billion dollars in direct and indirect revenue.<sup>14</sup>

**A study by Oxford Economics estimated that visa processing delays, if left unaddressed, could lead to the loss of 5.6 million visitors and \$18.7 billion in spending in 2025 and 2026.<sup>15</sup>**

These economic benefits and risks define the difficult task that federal policymakers must simultaneously achieve when it comes to visitor visa policy. To maximize the benefits of international visitation to the U.S., the visitor visa application process must be accessible, efficient and modern. To protect against the illegal immigration and national security risks of international visitation, the vetting of visitor visa applicants must be multi-dimensional, thorough and risk based.

### **VISION FOR A MORE SECURE, SEAMLESS AND MODERN VISITOR VISA SYSTEM**

The commission believes that visitor visa policy can and must achieve greater levels of security and efficiency. Achieving these goals will be even more important as the U.S. embarks on a mega-decade of global events hosted on U.S. soil. For many of the millions of international international visitors who are expected to attend these events, the visitor visa system will serve as their gateway. It will also be a determining factor in whether the U.S. can maximize the economic benefits of these large and complex global events and successfully compete to host them in the future.

Through its work, the commission has identified several areas of progress, challenges, and opportunities towards creating a more secure, seamless and modern visitor visa system. The commission envisions a visitor visa system that:

- Strengthens security by expanding membership in the Visa Waiver Program and increasing the number of countries that have secure travel partnerships with the U.S.; and
- Leverages modern technology, stronger vetting capabilities and appropriate staffing to reduce bureaucratic delays and increase overall processing capacity for visitor visas.



### **VISA WAIVER PROGRAM: PROGRESS, CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Visa Waiver Program (VWP) is a security-first program that strengthens international traveler vetting, identity verification and information sharing with foreign countries. The program now includes 43 countries. The DHS, with



support from the Department of State, leads negotiations with aspiring VWP countries and oversees implementation of the agreements.

To qualify for the VWP, a country must have a visitor visa refusal rate of less than 3% in the previous full fiscal year. A country must then meet all the stringent security requirements of the program, which include issuing tamper-proof electronic passports with machine readable biometric identifiers, reporting information on all lost and stolen passports to the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) and sharing information on travelers who may pose a terrorist or criminal threat.<sup>16</sup> A country must also provide the U.S. citizens with reciprocal visa-free travel.

A country may receive its VWP designation once the DHS certifies that all the program requirements have been met and determines that its admission would not compromise the law enforcement or security interests of the U.S. Once a country receives its VWP designation, its citizens may apply for an Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA) to visit the U.S., instead of a traditional B-1 or B-2 visa. If an applicant is approved through ESTA, he or she may travel to the U.S. for business or leisure purposes for short stays of up to three months at a time and the approval is valid for up to two years.

The VWP raises the bar globally for security standards by encouraging designated countries to create parallel requirements that inhibit the movement of terrorists, persons involved in transnational organized crime and other bad actors. Specifically, the VWP:

- **Enables recurrent screening against law enforcement and security databases:** ESTA is a powerful screening tool that allows CBP officers to assess, detect and identify threats based on real and current intelligence gathered by the U.S. and foreign partners. This individualized and recurrent vetting is conducted against multiple law enforcement and security databases, including the Terrorist Screening Database and INTERPOL's Stolen and Lost Travel Document database. The VWP also replaces the in-person interview conducted by consular officers upon application with an interview conducted by CBP law-enforcement officers upon arrival at U.S. airports of entry.
- **Strengthens information and intelligence sharing**





**with foreign countries:** VWP member countries are required to share with the U.S. information that would not otherwise be available. This includes robust information sharing agreements regarding potential terrorists and criminals gathered by a traveler's home government. These information sharing agreements are in addition to the U.S. government's own security screening systems.

- **Requires higher standards for identity verification:** All VWP countries must issue biometric, machine-readable, tamper resistant passports that meet internationally recognized standards. This allows CBP officers and other immigration officials to more easily detect fraudulent or forged documents which allows for easier detection of forged or fraudulent passports.
- **Mandates that DHS regularly audit VWP countries to ensure compliance with security requirements:** DHS has a vigorous review process for VWP countries, ensuring that issues identified through visits or in consultation with other U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies regarding any VWP security concerns, are addressed.

#### **PROGRESS TO FURTHER STRENGTHEN VWP SECURITY REQUIREMENTS AND EXPAND PARTICIPATION**

Since the VWP was created, Congress and DHS have continually strengthened the security benefits of the program. The commission applauds Congress, the DHS and the State Department for strengthening aspects of the VWP's security regime in recent years. For example:

- In 2015, Congress enacted the Visa Waiver Program Improvement and Terrorist Travel Prevention Act, which enhanced security requirements of the VWP. Among other provisions, the Act requires DHS to set timelines for VWP countries to fully implement the program's information sharing agreements and e-passport requirements.<sup>17</sup>



- In 2022, the DHS also announced that all VWP members must participate in Enhanced Border Security Partnerships (EBSP) by 2027. The EBSP enables CBP to instantaneously run automated queries of foreign criminal databases using fingerprints collected from foreign arrivals at U.S. POEs. Several VWP countries have already implemented this new requirement.<sup>18</sup>

The commission commends the DHS and State Department for recently expanding VWP membership to countries such as Greece, Taiwan, Chile, Poland, Croatia, Israel and Romania. Each time a new country is admitted to the VWP, it raises the security standards for international travel and generates substantial economic growth for the U.S.

#### BY THE NUMBERS

According to an analysis by Oxford Economics, the five countries added to the VWP from 2008 to 2014 experienced a 52% gain in visitation to the U.S. over the first three years. Visits to the U.S. from South Korea increased 60% by its third year in the VWP.<sup>19</sup>

#### KEY CHALLENGES

Despite the progress that has been made, the commission identified several challenges to expanding participation in VWP and increasing the number of countries that have travel security agreements with the U.S.

1. **The VWP's refusal rate requirement is a barrier to expanding U.S. security relationships with foreign countries.** Very few countries can meet the VWP's stringent visa refusal requirement of 3% or less and foreign governments have virtually no control over visa refusal rates. Therefore, without reasonable certainty of meeting the visa refusal metric, very few countries are willing to invest the substantial resources and political capital needed to achieve the VWP's security requirements. In FY 2024, only three countries (Cyprus, the United Arab Emirates and Uruguay) had refusal rates below 3%. In FY 2023, no countries had visa refusal rates below 3%. The only countries currently in advanced VWP negotiations with the U.S.

are Cyprus and Bulgaria, which are primarily driven by being the only EU countries not in the VWP. With visa refusal rates standing in the way, the U.S. has very few countries left that it can partner with to strengthen travel security through the VWP.

**2. Visa refusal rates are a poor indication of immigration risk compared to visa overstay data.**

When Congress first authorized the VWP in 1986, some lawmakers argued that overstay data was the best way to measure the risk of whether foreign nationals from a certain country might illegally immigrate to the U.S. However, at the time, the U.S. government's overstay data was inaccurate and incomplete. As a result, Congress chose visa refusal rates as a qualifying factor for VWP because the data set was more accurate and viewed as proxy for assessing immigration risk.<sup>20</sup> Since that time, the accuracy of CBP's overstay data has dramatically improved for both biographic and biometric exit systems. Congress gave the Secretary of Homeland Security authority to waive the visa refusal rate requirement in place of an overstay rate requirement of 10% or less, but that authority is suspended until 97% of international air departures go through CBP's biometric exit system.

**3. Sparse Federal funding to incentivize non-VWP countries to invest in security improvements.** Many countries do not have the financial resources to achieve all or even some of the technological and security enhancements of the VWP. Unfortunately, the DHS does not have dedicated funding to incentivize countries to make these investments or quicken the pace of implementation.



## SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**RECOMMENDATION:** To expand the number of countries that have strong travel security partnerships with the U.S., Congress should enact legislation authorizing a Secure Travel Partnership (STP) program that provides certain travel facilitation benefits to countries that meet the VWP security requirements, have an overstay rate of less than 5% and a visa refusal rate of less than 12%.

**TO BE ELIGIBLE FOR THE SECURE TRAVEL PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM, COUNTRIES WOULD BE REQUIRED TO:**

- Issue tamper-resistant, machine-readable visa documents
- Issue e-passports with electronic chips containing biometric data
- Use Certified mechanism to validate passports at each port of entry
- Establish Security Information Sharing Agreements, with implementation of Enhanced Border Security Partnership (EBSP)
- Screen foreign nationals against the INTERPOL database before issuing a visa or admitting them
- Provide INTERPOL with information on any lost/stolen passports or visas
- Establish a three-week repatriation agreement
- Achieve a DHS Secretary Security Determination

**IMMIGRATION QUALIFICATIONS FOR THE SECURE TRAVEL PARTNERSHIP COUNTRIES SHOULD INCLUDE:**

- Not more than 12% refusal rate in previous two fiscal years
- Not more than 5% overstay rate in previous two fiscal years

Once a country meets these security and immigration requirements, the State Department and DHS could adjust elements of the B-1/B-2 application process for citizens of STP countries.

**THE FACILITATION BENEFITS OF STP MEMBERSHIP COULD INCLUDE:**

- For highly qualified first-time B-1/B-2 applicants, consular officers could waive in-person interviews and biometric collection at U.S. embassies and instead have CBP conduct interviews and collect biometrics upon arrival at U.S. airports of entry.
- Approved interview-waiver applicants could receive B-1/B-2 visas with up to 10 years of validity or less as determined by the State Department and DHS. Approved interview waiver applicants could also be permitted to use ESTA for up to a two-year period, rather than receiving the full term of B-1/B-2 validity for that country.



- Countries with STP status could receive full VWP status after five years, provided security requirements remain fully implemented and visa overstays remain below 5%.

Implementing this recommendation would strengthen U.S. national security by incentivizing more countries to share intelligence and prohibit the movement of terrorists, criminals and other bad actors. Under this proposal, 24 countries would qualify to participate in the STP based on their FY 2023 visa refusal and overstay rates—compared to just three countries that meet the refusal rate requirement for VWP. These countries include strong allies and travel-trade partners of the U.S., such as India, Brazil, Bulgaria, Argentina, Uruguay, and the United Arab Emirates.



### VISITOR VISA PROCESSING AND POLICY: PROGRESS, CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the State Department faced significant backlogs in NIV applications and interview appointments.<sup>21</sup>

While some progress has been made, significant challenges persist today. In some of the top countries for inbound travel to the U.S., visitor visa applicants still face extremely long wait times for in-person interviews that can stretch for several months or more than a year. For example, interview wait times in Mumbai, India, were 444 days as of January 10, 2025.<sup>22</sup>

#### PROGRESS TO REDUCE WAIT TIMES AND INCREASE ISSUANCE

The State Department has made some progress to lower interview wait times and increase issuance of visitor visas. For example, in Sao Paulo, Brazil, appointment wait times were 31 days as of January 10, 2025, down from more than 300 days in January 2023.<sup>23</sup> In October 2024, the State Department announced that it had issued more than 11.5 million visas in FY 2024, including 8.5 million visitor visas, which is more than any year since 2015.

A major reason for the reduction in interview wait times and increased NIV issuance is the interview waiver authority

that was implemented by the State Department and DHS. This policy enhances national security by allowing the State Department to focus more resources on vetting first-time and potentially ineligible NIV applicants, while providing consular officers the discretion to waive interviews for low-risk applicants. According to the State Department, approximately 40 percent of NIV applicants who received a visa did not require an interview in 2023.<sup>24</sup> However, this also suggests that the State Department's interview-based processing capacity is currently much lower compared to previous years where it issued similar numbers of NIVs, such as 2015, without the interview waiver authority.<sup>25</sup>

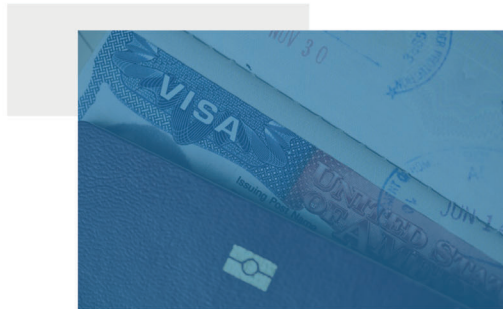
### KEY CHALLENGES

The State Department faces several challenges to improving security, efficiency and technology for visitor visa processing:

1. **Visa processing capacity is constrained by requirements for in-person interviews and collection of biometrics.** The statutory requirements for in-person interviews with consular officers and collection of biometrics create bureaucratic bottle necks that can lead to appointment wait times exceeding 200 days. These one-size-fits-all vetting policies hinder security, efficiency, and innovations in visa processing because consular officers' time and resources are spent on low-risk applicants — rather than high-risk or first-time unknown applicants. The State Department and DHS have used emergency authority to waive in-person interviews and biometric collection for low-risk NIV applicants who have recently held an NIV in a different category (except B visas), have no immigration or criminal violations and have passed national security vetting. However, the current interview waiver authority is limited and temporary and could be revoked at any time. If this were to happen, it would dramatically increase interview wait times and reduce NIV issuance.
2. **The State Department's staffing model constrains visa processing capacity.** Inadequate staffing levels for consular sections is a major impediment to expanding nonimmigrant visa processing capacity worldwide. Because NIV interviews are conducted by entry-level foreign service officers on short-term assignments, it is difficult for the State Department to



build expertise in visa adjudication services. Further, it can be difficult for the State Department to create long-term hiring and staffing plans to meet visa processing demand with a temporary workforce that is hired based on staffing needs in other areas of the foreign service. As a result, staffing for visa adjudication is constantly turning over and can fluctuate based on the availability of federal funding, State Department policy or staffing needs across the entire foreign service. While the Consular Fellows Program was created to address some of these challenges, Consular Fellows also perform visa adjudication services on temporary assignments and often use the program as a stepping stone to the foreign service.



**3. Remote videoconference interviews are prohibited.**

Under current law, the State Department does not have the authority to conduct remote videoconference interviews for NIV applicants, which could create a more seamless application process and expand visa processing capacity. However, even if the State Department had the authority to conduct remote videoconference interviews, applicants would still need to visit an embassy or consulate to provide their biometrics because the Department does not have the technology or procedures to collect biometrics outside an embassy or consulate.



- 4. The State Department does not use automated risk assessment tools to optimize workflow.** Utilizing automated risk assessment tools can enhance risk assessment by focusing resources on unknown or potentially high-risk applicants and streamlining operations in the review of NIV applications. However, these tools are not being utilized by the State Department, the DHS vetting center or other agencies involved in NIV application reviews.
- 5. Consular Affairs cannot utilize certain funds collected from passport and visa processing fees, which constrains funding for consular staffing, technology and infrastructure upgrades.** Due to these funding constraints, Consular Affairs is hesitant to increase hiring and staffing simply to account for temporary spikes in visa processing demand and lacks permanent contingency plans to surge staffing when backlogs arise. Inadequate funding also leads to infrastructure constraints at U.S. consulates and embassies, such as limited windows for NIV interviews at consular posts that constrain visa processing capacity. The high costs of constructing or modernizing facilities abroad limits expansion of physical infrastructure to process visas.
- 6. Large global events, conventions, meetings and tours taking place in the U.S. can spike demand for B-1/B-2 visas or increase requests for expedited appointments and adjudication.** The mega-decade of global events hosted in the U.S. will increase demand for B-1/B-2 visas and other NIV categories. For example, the 2026 FIFA World Cup is expected to attract more than six million visitors to the U.S. According to FIFA, eight of the top 15 countries that have traveled to attend previous World Cups are non-VWP countries that will need visitor visas to attend in the U.S. The increases in applications for major global events are predictable if consular posts have the right information from partners and can appropriately respond with increased consular staffing or expanded hours of operation. But the State Department currently takes an ad hoc approach to adjusting NIV services for large global events hosted in the U.S.



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**Global events can spike demand for B-1/B-2 visas.**

**SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:**

The commission makes the following recommendations to address these problems:

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**RECOMMENDATION:** Congress should enact legislation to create a new National Vetting Service (NVS) — separate from the foreign service — that would be solely dedicated to visa adjudication.

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The NVS would be a workforce that is self-funded through visa fees, receives standard consular officer training and flexible assignments so they can be deployed based on operational needs of Consular Affairs. Congress may consider making the NVS part of DHS, rather than the State Department, since visa vetting is not inherently a diplomatic function. Creating a permanent workforce to adjudicate visas would build more tenured expertise within the State Department for conducting NIV interviews and vetting applicants. The NVS would also enable the State Department or DHS to build a more stable workforce for visa adjudication that could be augmented by the temporary assignment of entry-level foreign service officers and consular fellows. The NVS could be assigned to posts based on foreign language skills, visa processing demand and negotiations with host governments on the size of the U.S. mission. The NVS workforce could be authorized to rotate on assignment to other roles in federal agencies that support visa adjudication, such as CBP or U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).

- **Recommendation:** Congress should enact legislation that permanently authorizes the State Department and DHS to waive in-person interviews for low-risk applicants. This would enhance national security by allowing consular officers to focus more resources on unknown applicants or those that present a security or immigration risk. The legislation should be flexible to allow, but not require, the State Department and DHS to waive interviews for individuals who are: previous NIV holders applying for a new NIV in a different category; certain ESTA travelers



who have recently visited the U.S. and are applying for an NIV; accredited persons applying for an NIV to participate in a large global event hosted in the U.S.; and renewal applicants whose previous NIV expired not more than 48 months prior to their application that have previously traveled to the U.S., have no immigration or criminal violations, have not been previously refused an NIV and have not been flagged as a national security risk.

- **Recommendation:** To prepare for major sports and global events hosted in the U.S., Congress should enact legislation authorizing the State Department and DHS to extend B-1/B-2 visa validity for vetted, lawful visa holders. The State Department and DHS should be authorized to extend B-1/B-2 visa validity by up to two years for lawful visa holders who have never been refused a visa, have previously visited the U.S., left the country on time, have no immigration or criminal violations and no flags for national security reasons. This would reduce NIV interview backlogs and provide additional capacity to adjudicate first-time visitor visa applicants.
- **Recommendation:** Congress should authorize and fund the State Department, in partnership with DHS, to develop and pilot risk-informed, rules-based vetting of NIV applicants. Applicants may be flagged for additional review — or for interview waiver — based on a review and analysis of the vetting results. By enhancing the ability to do person by person risk assessments, the State Department can more effectively determine which applicants are best suited for interview waivers — rather than designating everyone in a specific category as potentially eligible for an interview waiver.
- **Recommendation:** Congress should enact legislation to authorize the State Department to conduct remote video conference and in-person interviews. Rather than requiring first-time NIV applicants to schedule in-person interviews at consular posts, the State Department could pilot and expand the use of videoconferencing technology to allow interviews with consular officers to be conducted remotely. For example, consular officers stationed at posts with low demand for visas could remotely interview NIV applicants using approved videoconferencing technology. Congress should also authorize and fund the State Department to conduct in-person interviews and biometric collection outside an embassy or consulate



during periods of high demand. The State Department could use locations outside the embassy or consulate to conduct group interviews or biometric collection for participants in large sporting events hosted in the U.S., tour groups, conferences or business travelers who have applied for NIVs.



- **Recommendation:** The State Department should pilot and then expand the use of remote biometric capture to reduce appointment backlogs at consular posts. The State Department should consider where it could either work with the host government or approved contractors to collect biometrics outside an embassy or consulate. Other U.S. government agencies (e.g. USCIS) utilize approved contractors to capture biometrics at applicant-convenient locations and the State Department should consider a similar approach. Remote biometric capture could also be used by NIV applicants that were interviewed by videoconference.

- **Recommendation:** Congress should enact legislation to ensure visa and passport fees are immediately available to Consular Affairs. The funds should be available to Consular Affairs for managing the visa process, including activities to reduce interview wait times, making needed technological or infrastructure upgrades, hiring more personnel or reassigning existing staff to conduct visa adjudications and supporting contracts.

- **Recommendation:** Congress should enact legislation directing the State Department to develop and execute contingency plans to surge staffing for NIV interviews and adjudication at posts where average B-1/B-2 interview wait times consistently exceed 90 days. The legislation should direct the State Department to designate staff that will be available for temporary relocation or remote processing when significant interview backlogs occur.

- **Recommendation:** Congress should enact legislation authorizing the State Department, DHS and the Department of Commerce (DOC) to create a permanent framework for identifying large international events that require efficient B-1/B-2 visa processing or expedited appointments for credentialed individuals. Partnerships between the State Department, DHS, DOC and the private sector can create efficient pathways for NIV applicants attending large international sporting events,

conventions, meetings or tours in the U.S. For example, the U.S. Commercial Service has offices around the U.S. which can identify large international events in their region that require visa services. Working with Commercial Service Officers and Consular Affairs stationed abroad, appointment blocks and expedited B-1/B-2 processing can be offered to applicants attending these events. Similarly, the State Department and DHS should be authorized to create an electronic visa system, waive in-person interviews and provide expedited appointments for credentialed participants in large sporting events, such as the Olympics and World Cup. The State Department could also reserve weeks of appointment blocks for B-1/B-2 applicants attending events such as the Consumer Electronic Show, F1, Olympics, or the World Cup.

- **Recommendation:** Congress should enact legislation to authorize Consular Affairs to charge fees for expedited B-1/B-2 applications and deposit the funds in the Consular and Border Security Programs account to cover the costs of visa processing.

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#### Endnotes for Strengthening Visitor Visa Policy

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# Commission on Seamless and Secure Travel

## THE COMMISSION ON SEAMLESS AND SECURE TRAVEL

The [Commission on Seamless and Secure Travel](#) was launched in January 2024. The commission aims to build a vision and recommend policies to increase U.S. competitiveness within the travel industry, improve government focus and coordination on travel issues, and facilitate growth.

Since its founding, the commission has engaged with federal agencies, industry partners at airports in the United States, and other countries during site visits to learn more about best practices, cutting-edge technologies, pain points and opportunities to improve and grow travel.



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