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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
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June 10, 2024

The Honorable David P. Pekoske, Administrator
Transportation Security Administration
601 12th St S,
Arlington, VA 20598

Dear Administrator Pekoske:

I write today to request information about the Transportation Security Administration's (TSA) screening procedures. As you are aware, five Americans, including Ryan Watson of Edmond, Oklahoma, have been detained this year in the Turks and Caicos due to ammunition being discovered in their luggage as they passed through security on the islands. It is my understanding that each of these individuals had successfully passed through TSA screening, but TSA personnel failed to identify these items during passenger screening. TSA exists to protect the "nation's transportation systems to ensure freedom of movement."¹ TSA's failure in these five cases raises serious concerns about TSA's ability to accomplish this critical security mission.

The five Americans in each of these separate cases were hoping to head home when Turks and Caicos transportation security discovered stray ammunition; instead, they found themselves arrested and detained in a foreign country.² While two Americans have now been released and another has been allowed to return to the U.S. temporarily for medical reasons, Ryan and two other Americans are still stuck in the Turks and Caicos and remain separated from their families and friends.³ These Americans could face up-to 12 years in prison under the Turks and Caicos' Firearms Act.⁴

As you are aware, TSA was initially created in response to the September 11 attacks to ensure that the Federal government had unified procedures for screening passengers and cargo. TSA has an expansive mission over many modes of transportation; however, most Americans primarily associate TSA with the luggage screening procedures at airports.

These five cases and other cases like it raise serious concerns about TSA's passenger screening operations.⁵ Nearly ten years ago, examinations by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Office of the Inspector General (OIG) found that TSA missed 67 out of 70 weapons and bombs that OIG attempted to

¹ Transportation Security Administration, "About Us," *TSA.GOV*: <https://www.tsa.gov/about/tsa-mission>.

² Stefan Joyce and Ivan Pereira, "American held in Turks and Caicos over ammunition speaks out after returning home," *ABC News*, May 27, 2024: <https://abcnews.go.com/US/american-held-turks-caicos-ammunition-speaks-after-returning/story?id=110585899>.

³ Michael Rios, et. al., "American who carried ammunition in Turks and Caicos gets suspended sentence and heads home. Fate of others charged is unclear," *CNN*, May 25, 2024: <https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/24/americas/turks-and-caicos-ammunition-american-sentencing/index.html>; Meredith Deliso and Stefan Joyce, "American sentenced to time served, fined \$9,000 for bringing ammo to Turks and Caicos," *ABC News*, May 28, 2024: <https://abcnews.go.com/International/tyler-wenrich-turks-and-caicos-ammunition-sentence/story?id=110609686>.

⁴ Audrey Conklin, "Oklahoma airport under TSA microscope after Turks and Caicos jails dad found with ammo," *Fox News*, April 25, 2024: <https://www.foxnews.com/us/oklahoma-airport-tsa-microscope-turks-and-caicos-jails-dad-found-ammo>.

⁵ King 5 Staff, "Washington state senator who inadvertently brought firearm in luggage will not face charges," *King 5*, October 29, 2023: <https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/washington-state-senator-firearm-luggage-no-charges/281-953240fe-f689-4023-8258-c83fec39e1fc>.

smuggle through TSA screening.⁶ As the Ranking Member of the Subcommittee on Government Operations and Border Management, I am tasked with the assessment of the management of our nation's borders and the management and efficiency of government agencies. Pursuant to this jurisdiction, I ask the following questions:

1. What is TSA's tolerance for failed passenger and luggage screenings?
2. What percentage of prohibited items (e.g., ammunition) may pass through a passenger or luggage screening before the screening is considered a failure?
3. When was the last time the TSA assessed its passenger screening and luggage screening processes? Please provide the results of any such assessment.
4. When was the last time TSA tested whether prohibited items and other threats to transportation security were able to enter the sterile areas of airports? Please provide the results of any such assessment.
5. An April 2024 *Fox News* report indicated that TSA is "conducting a review at OKC [Will Rogers Airport]" in light of this situation.⁷ Has TSA completed that review? If so, please provide a copy of this review.
6. Is TSA conducting reviews of any of the other TSA screening facilities through which any of these individuals travelled? If so, please provide copies of these reviews.
7. In light of these cases, what is your plan to ensure TSA is able to fulfill its security mission and successfully conduct passenger screenings?

Thank you for your response to this matter. I look forward to receiving your response by not later than COB, July 10, 2024.

In God We Trust,



James Lankford
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Government Operations
and Border Management

⁶ Eric Bradner and Rene Marsh, "Acting TSA director reassigned after screeners failed tests to detect explosives, weapons," *CNN*, June 2, 2015: <https://www.cnn.com/2015/06/01/politics/tsa-failed-undercover-airport-screening-tests/index.html>.

⁷ *Supra* note 4.