



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Hearing Statement of Transportation & Maritime Security Subcommittee Chairman Lou Correa (D-CA)

Securing America's Transportation and Maritime Systems: A Review of the Fiscal Year 2021 Budget Requests for the Transportation Security Administration and the U.S. Coast Guard

March 11, 2020

Currently, we are dealing with the public health crisis caused by the novel coronavirus. As the government responds and strives to limit the spread of the virus, I worry that TSA and the Coast Guard will struggle to protect their front-line workforces while they carry out their security missions.

Last night, TSA announced that three officers at San Jose International Airport have tested positive for COVID-19. Our thoughts go out to them, and we wish them a speedy recovery.

They are among the 46,000 brave Transportation Security Officers, TSOs, who are continuing to show up to work during this crisis and who are interacting with thousands of passengers traveling from all over the world.

Similarly, Coast Guard personnel interact regularly with foreign nationals and international travelers while they perform law enforcement functions and search and rescue operations. We must make sure the workforces of both agencies are kept as safe as possible, and that they are able to receive appropriate health care benefits.

Turning to today's topic, this budget proposal asks the men and women of TSA and the Coast Guard to go on doing more with less and redirects desperately needed funding to the President's misguided plans for a wall at the southern border. TSA, for example, is proposing cuts to important security programs that Congress has already made clear are unacceptable. These cuts include eliminating VIPR teams that provide security at airports and mass transit hubs, as well as eliminating TSA staffing of airport exit lanes and funding for airport law enforcement through the Law Enforcement Officer Reimbursement Program.

The Administration also proposes a hiring freeze of 1,100 full time employees—a cap on staffing that only makes sense now in light of the unexpected travel downturn that has developed over the past few days. The budget also fails to request resources needed to address the major security vulnerabilities the Administration will create if it follows through with its plans to enforce REAL ID compliance at TSA checkpoints starting October 1, 2020.

If DHS follows through with those plans, millions of passengers who have not obtained a REAL ID compliant identification will not be allowed through a TSA checkpoint. This change could result in crowded public areas and long lines at screening checkpoints nationwide. DHS estimates only 35 percent of Americans have REAL ID cards.

The disruption at airports could cripple operations and the travel industry—and leave the workforce to deal with the backlash from angry passengers. Throughout its existence, TSA has struggled with low morale and high attrition among its frontline workforce.

Thankfully, this budget does include a proposal to begin providing regular salary increases to TSOs.

I appreciate that TSA is recognizing the need to prioritize TSO pay and career progression—issues this Committee has been emphasizing for many years.

I commend the Administrator for developing this proposal for regular salary increases, but it does not go far enough. Without a change to the statute, salary increases will be subject to the whims of the annual budgeting process.

The budget proposal also fails to increase the starting salaries for new TSOs or provide basic civil service protections available to other government workers both issues which would be covered under Chairman Thompson's bill, the Rights for TSOs Act, which the House passed last week.

If the President is serious about wanting to provide the frontline TSA workforce the support it desperately needs, he should withdraw his threat to veto this landmark legislation and urge the Senate to pass it. When it comes to supporting the Coast Guard, the President's budget proposal is not much better.

No one is more resource-constrained than the Coast Guard, with its 11 statutory missions and the least funding among military branches. I am honored by the service and commitment of the people of the Coast Guard, who always rise to the challenge and meet their mission.

However, no organization can run indefinitely without adequate resources and support. We are already seeing the effects today. The long-term failure to adequately fund the Coast Guard fleet sufficiently leaves us with a shortage of assets to carry out Coast Guard operations. For example, the Coast Guard does not have enough icebreakers and will not receive the first Polar Security Cutter until 2024.

And while this budget includes funding for a second Polar Security Cutter, it makes no attempt whatsoever to address the Coast Guard's \$2 billion backlog of shore infrastructure maintenance and recapitalization projects. A lack of strategic funding endangers our national security, as without the necessary assets and infrastructure the Coast Guard is unable to address the majority of known threats.

For example, the Coast Guard has estimated that it knows about 80 percent of maritime drug movements but can only target 20 percent of those movements for interdiction because of resource constraints. Despite those constraints, the Coast Guard continues to lead federal agencies in seizing more cocaine than all other federal agencies combined.

The President has stated that preventing drugs from entering the country is a priority for this Administration. If he wants to stop drugs from coming across our borders, he should fully fund the Coast Guard, instead of redirecting military funds to build an antiquated border wall.

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