

# Lawmaker: TSA should focus on intelligence, not screenings

By Andrew Becker, Reveal

To prevent terrorist attacks against planes, railways and travelers, the Transportation Security Administration needs to focus on intelligence to identify and address threats – and leave screening to private contractors, a lawmaker said.

Rep. John Mica, R-Fla., described the agency as an unmanageable bureaucracy that can barely staff itself. The agency's intelligence shortcomings are "absolutely scary," he told Reveal from the Center for Investigative Reporting the day after an explosive House oversight committee hearing in April on TSA misconduct.

"The most important thing is the intelligence and analysis part – the government part: handling classified information, information on terrorists, the ability to track people, to make sure the (terrorist) watch list is up to date, so people are identified even before they get to the airport," Mica said. "That is how we connect dots."

TSA Administrator Peter Neffenger should not expend more resources to inspect people at airport checkpoints who don't pose a risk, Mica said. Rather than managing the screeners themselves, he said, the TSA should supervise the screening process. He blamed a small group of fewer than 20 embedded, highly paid bureaucrats who protect the status quo, their positions and their salaries but don't get the job done.

"It is a scenario of 'The Three Stooges' the way some of the operations operate," the 12-term congressman said. "It's not a pretty picture."

Both a champion of the creation of the TSA nearly 15 years ago

and a frequent critic, Mica said he was writing to Neffenger to express his concerns and expects to question him during an upcoming hearing.

It was a tough day for the beleaguered agency, as the TSA faced sharp criticism from three of its senior managers at the hearing. Media coverage highlighted the troubled intelligence office and reports that a top official in Minneapolis was instructed to target Somali Americans for screening as potential terrorists.

Saddled with low morale, high turnover and poor performance, the TSA has seen its checkpoint security lines grow. The agency has refocused on security after covert testing found a 95 percent failure rate to detect fake bombs and other weapons. Mica pointed out that the TSA's performance has worsened in the last decade, despite an increase in screeners.

Several airports around the nation, including Atlanta, Minneapolis and Seattle, have begun to explore or are considering a shift to private contractors to conduct checkpoint screenings. The long screening lines, expected to get longer during the busy summer travel season, also pose a security risk, experts say.

Neffenger has traveled the country to address aviation industry concerns. He also was in Brussels around the time of the March 22 terrorist attacks that killed 32.

He turned his attention inward, as the agency tried to fend off the criticism. In an email sent to all TSA employees, a copy of which was obtained by Reveal, Neffenger praised the agency, which he said should not be distracted by media reports on long security lines and allegations of misbehavior.

"I am confident that we're on a sound trajectory, and I'm optimistic about the future," he wrote.

Whistleblowers have highlighted misconduct among top leaders and allegations of retaliation for drawing attention to various issues, from security gaps to discrimination.

Mica said the managers who testified were “three of the most incredible witnesses we’ve seen testify at TSA ever.”

“The degree of intimidation has gagged everyone,” he said. “I consider them very brave, and their testimony confirmed some of our worst suspicions.”

But the Florida lawmaker also said Congress bears some responsibility for the agency’s shortcomings. Lawmakers who hold the agency’s purse strings haven’t examined it closely enough, Mica said. He said a relatively inexperienced House of Representatives and a general lack of understanding about or interest in aviation security issues also played a part.

“I don’t think Congress does all it should in changing the M.O. (modus operandi) of TSA and DHS,” he said, also referring to the TSA’s parent agency, the Department of Homeland Security. “You can’t just blame the agencies. You have to put some of the blame on us. We will raise some Cain, but it is up to Neffenger to change.”