



## **DHS secretary to air travelers: 'There will be wait times this summer'**

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Under fire from Congress and outraged passengers over long wait times at security checkpoints, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) announced new steps Friday aimed at easing delays during the busy summer travel season.

TSA Administrator Peter Neffenger appeared before the House Oversight Committee Thursday to answer for the agency's failings.

"I am systematically and deliberately leading the transformation of the TSA," said Neffenger, who took control of the embattled agency last summer. He acknowledged much work remains to be done, though.

Members of Congress questioned how effective this "transformation" has really been.

"You cannot recruit, you cannot train, you cannot retain, and you cannot administrate," said Rep. John Mica (R-FL). "This is a huge failing program."

The TSA was criticized for security lapses, high turnover rate of screening staff, allegations of retaliation against whistleblowers, and excessive bonuses for officials. Neffenger insisted he has already taken steps to address many of the lawmakers' concerns.

The hearing came on the same day that problems with luggage screening systems at Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport left workers unable to place more than 3,000 checked bags on their flights.

Delays in recent weeks at some of the nation's busiest airports have led to travelers tweeting photos of the long security lines with the hashtag #iHatetheWait.

Following his brutal grilling at the hearing, Neffenger joined Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Jeh Johnson at Reagan National Airport Friday to unveil a 10-part plan to address the security problems.

"Our task is to keep passengers moving, but to also, most importantly, keep passengers safe," Johnson said.

The 10 steps he outlined included hiring more security screeners, allowing more flexibility in staff scheduling, working with airlines to reduce the size and amount of carryon luggage, and promoting the TSA PreCheck program.

Johnson said TSA has an aggressive plan that will rectify traveler complaints without compromising safety, but he denied that airport security is currently in a crisis.

"I would not characterize it as a national crisis," he said. "I do characterize our current situation as an aviation security imperative."

He added that passengers need to have "the appropriate expectations" that there will be long security lines this summer.

The complaints are not only coming from passengers, though. The Port Authority, which manages New York City's airports, sent a letter to Neffenger earlier this week calling the security wait times "abysmal" and warning that the delays could damage the local economy.

In response, the TSA argued that part of the problem was travelers carrying too much baggage and not being properly prepared to go through security.

Lawmakers have also pointed fingers at airlines, alleging that fees for checked bags encourage passengers to drag their luggage through the airport with them.

"Without charges for checking their bags, passengers will be far less likely to carry them on, which snarls screening checkpoints and slows the inspection process," Sens. Edward Markey (D-MA) and Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) wrote in a letter to airlines urging them to waive fees this summer.

Discontent with the TSA has led to renewed calls to privatize airport security. Some major U.S. airports do currently use private contractors approved by the TSA to handle their screening, but most still rely on TSA staff.

Some conservatives and libertarians have had the agency in their crosshairs for years, though. A 2013 report by Cato Institute expert Chris Edwards laid out a plan for abolishing the TSA and shifting security to the private sector, as many Canadian and European airports have.

"That practice creates a more efficient and innovative security structure, and it allows governments to focus on gathering intelligence and conducting analysis rather than on trying to manage a large workforce," Edwards wrote.

While there are undeniably flaws in the system, some of which may be deeply rooted and difficult to correct, aviation security experts say simply abolishing the agency would be a mistake.

"Is privatization going to solve those issues?" said Anthony Roman, president of global investigation and risk management firm Roman & Associates. "Absolutely not...Privatization does not speed up the lines, does not improve the process."

Roman, a former commercial jet pilot, has reservations about private contractors unless they are properly trained former federal personnel. He pointed to the failed effort to staff the 2012 London Olympics with private security as an example of what can go wrong.

Advocates for privatization argue that government workers have less incentive to perform well than contractors would. Low morale among TSA staff is also a major problem under the current system.

Private security is not inherently more or less effective than the TSA, according to Roman, but problems with training, budgeting, and execution would remain. He suggested the U.S. airports that have opted out of TSA staffing have demonstrated that.

"It's not addressing the issue that's causing the problem."

Neffenger's efforts to retrain screeners and eliminate some shortcuts in the security process may be making people safer, but they have also exacerbated delays.

"I think Admiral Neffenger has actually improved the awareness and training of the TSA staff," Roman said. "However, this slows things down. By being thorough, the screening process moves much more slowly."

That, combined with increased spring and summer travel, has created the current dilemma. Understaffing and a failure to adequately promote the faster PreCheck service have also contributed to the TSA's troubles. Still, the tradeoff between delays and safety may not be avoidable.

"You can't have it cheap and good," Roman said. "You cannot have it fast and good."

Neffenger has also chalked many of the agency's problems up to funding and staffing, but legislators rejected that argument at the House hearing Thursday.

"This is a management and performance problem," said Rep. Mark DeSaulnier (D-CA).

According to Seth Kaplan, analyst and managing partner at Airline Weekly, large crowds gathered at checkpoints who have not yet been screened may be creating an easy target for terrorists.

"Everybody accepts that security needs to be thorough, but long lines by themselves are not necessarily an indication of thorough security," he said.

He agreed that one of the underlying problems here is manpower.

"We're talking about mitigating something that is first and foremost just not having enough screeners where they need to be," Kaplan said.

Despite internal investigations that have identified severe security lapses and contraband items easily clearing checkpoints during tests, Kaplan noted that the TSA has been successful in preventing attacks.

"There hasn't been another 9/11 since 9/11 and that's important to recognize," he said, and since box cutters were not prohibited at the time, even 9/11 was not really a failure of airport security.

The idea that eliminating the TSA would be an improvement may be a popular talking point for politicians, but he fears some alternatives could prove to be much worse in the end.

"What we need is more accountability, one way or another," Kaplan said.

Organizations that advocate for airlines and passengers were encouraged by the steps Johnson announced Friday, but they continue to seek specific reforms.

"Lines at our airports are already too long, but come summer, they'll only get worse," said Joe Sitt, chairman of the Global Gateway Alliance, in a statement. "It's past time now for Congress to fund increased staffing at the nation's busiest hubs like those in the New York area, and for TSA to focus on getting more passengers enrolled in PreCheck."

"TSA must also bring back its website tracking real wait time data, so it can make informed decisions on how best to strengthen security at its airports," he added.

Global Gateway Alliance wants to see concrete commitments from the TSA and Congress, rather than short term fixes, as passenger numbers grow.

Melanie Hinton, a managing director for Airlines for America, emphasized the PreCheck program as a way to expedite screening.

"We continue to urge TSA officials to ensure adequate staffing and equipment is being sent to the airports where they are most needed," she said. "Additionally, we would like to see a more robust effort to register new participants for TSA PreCheck, which would reduce overall wait times."

Airlines for America has created [www.ihatethewait.com](http://www.ihatethewait.com) for travelers to crowd-source wait time information and tell each other what to expect.

As these problems and complaints build up, Roman suggested the government's approach to security may need to be rethought, but he warned some changes will produce more delays.

"With every improvement we make comes a set of unintended consequences...It doesn't mean we have to dismantle the entire system," he said.

The long lines are ultimately only one aspect of the debate, and as Secretary Johnson said Friday, some wait times are inevitable this summer.

"Fundamentally, what we have is an inadequate budget, an initial plan that's fundamentally flawed, and when it doesn't work, we look for quick fixes such as privatization," Roman said.