May 24, 2016

The Honorable Paul Ryan  
Speaker of the House  
233 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
Senate Majority Leader  
317 Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy  
House Majority Leader  
2421 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable John Cornyn  
Senate Majority Whip  
517 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi  
House Minority Leader  
233 Cannon House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Harry Reid  
Senate Minority Leader  
522 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Steny Hoyer  
House Minority Whip  
1705 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Dick Durbin  
Senate Minority Whip  
711 Hart Senate Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Leaders:

As you know, passenger screening wait times at airports across the country have risen to unacceptably high levels. This is of great concern to our members and our customers, and we have been working with the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) to collaboratively address this issue. These delays have been caused by the TSA and Congress both cutting staff and reducing the number of people included in risk-based screening programs while travel was increasing as projected.

To resolve this issue, which is harming airline passengers and our economy, we are urging Congress to return the $13 billion in increased airline security ticket taxes that is being diverted to offset the deficit as enacted as part of the Bipartisan Budget Act (BBA) of 2013. This money should be returned to TSA to pay for security as it was intended.

We spoke out against it when the BBA was being debated, noting that passengers are paying more for security but getting nothing for it. Thirty months later, that decision has come home to roost, to the dismay of the 2.2 million passengers who take to the skies in the U.S. each day. We ask that Congress send legislation to the President that ensures that TSA ticket taxes will be used to improve security.
Last year, we had record summer travel, but didn’t have a wait time issue. That is because while Congress and TSA reduced funding and staff, TSA was able to maintain acceptable wait times by improving efficiency through greater use of risk-based screening. After an embarrassing Inspector General report that revealed screening deficiencies, TSA eliminated some risk-based initiatives and increased the screening of passengers, WITHOUT adjusting their staffing. Congress and the Administration should focus on ensuring that TSA pursues effective and efficient screening through a risk-based approach while ensuring their methodology for requesting and allocating staff is rational and transparent.

While some Members of Congress have recently called on U.S. airlines to suspend fees for checked baggage during peak summer months, this is nothing more than a diversion from the problem at hand. Bag fees have in been in place since 2008, while this wait time issue has developed over the last seven months, demonstrating that there is no cause and effect.

Encouraging passengers to check more bags will not help and would actually exacerbate current checked baggage screening issues that are resulting in passengers missing their connections and having their bags delayed. Recent media coverage of baggage screening delays and the resulting passenger misconnections at Phoenix and Miami demonstrate that TSA is struggling with screening both passengers and baggage. Even at Midway, served predominantly by an airline that offers free checked bags, wait times are in excess of 90 minutes, further demonstrating that this problem is not a result of airline pricing. And, the majority of customers who check a bag do not pay a fee to do so.

A4A has encouraged our customers to enroll in expedited screening programs like TSA PreCheck and Custom and Border Protection’s (CBP) Global Entry. Our members have also encouraged enrollment in these programs by in some cases covering the cost of the programs for frequent fliers or enabling them to use frequent flier points to pay to enroll. Carriers have also committed to continued vigorous education and enforcement of their current weight and size limits for carryon baggage, which are governed by FAA safety regulations.

Finally, airlines are in many cases using their own staff at TSA checkpoints to perform non-security functions like bin return and divestiture duties. This effort comes at considerable cost in addition to the $3.56 billion passengers are paying into the current system.

We are doing all we can to correct this situation caused by a failure to staff the TSA according to need. We are asking Congress to do what it can, and return diverted passenger 9/11 taxes back to pay for security as they were intended.

Sincerely,

Nicholas E. Calio

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