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Daughter, Judy Larocque (passenger on AA11)

“TSA’s Efforts to Advance Risk-Based Security: Stakeholder Perspectives”

Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Transportation Security
U.S. House of Representatives
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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Richmond, Members of the Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to submit my thoughts on the need for the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) to conduct risk-based security, as well as the need for thoughtful public discourse by our lawmakers and all stakeholders on the issues surrounding the safety and security of the American people.

The recent proposed changes to the prohibited item list (PIL) and the ensuing outcry from certain stakeholders remind me how important it is that we not allow our emotions nor complacency to restrict us to a narrow view of what transportation security needs to be. Rather, our safety and security depend on keeping the big picture in mind, on remaining vigilant to the constant, real and ever-evolving threat our transportation sector faces.

Sadly, my family knows far too well what happens when complacency and a narrow view of what can happen dictate how we handle security. On the morning of September 11, 2001, the morning that my mom, Judy Larocque boarded American Airlines 11, the prevailing views were that hijackings were crimes committed by political activists, not suicide bombers. We now realize that the threat is far greater than to those who simply work and travel on aircraft. The threat whose last line of defense is at an airport security checkpoint is against thousands of innocent people potentially hundreds of miles from the airport itself.

I never expected to become an expert in aviation security, and would gladly have traveled down another career path, one my mom would have supported and cheered me on in. I do not have that luxury. Today my sister and I have to live a life without my mother. Mom will never know her grandchildren. She will never give us another hug, nor ever say our names again.

It is because of what happened to her that I am submitting testimony today. Transportation security is too important to allow politics or misunderstandings to come in the way of what is best for the American public. It disheartens me that the discourse I have seen since the proposed PIL changes were announced are not as productive as I hope they could and should be.

TSA is proposing to allow small blades on planes. When I first heard the news, I admit I was shocked. But I have met with many Transportation Security Officers (TSOs), many officials who work at TSA headquarters, and even two TSA Administrators. I know these people on the whole to be as concerned with the safety and the security of the American public as I am. They are intelligent individuals who I believe would not want to endanger the traveling public. I decided not to let my initial emotional reaction be the only thing to color my view of the change.

So I listened and learned. I found out that the new PIL would be more in line with international regulations, though more strict. Having flown on a large number of international carriers around the globe, I recognized that if I had not let their standards affect my willingness to fly then, why would I change my mind now?

I also realized that while it felt uncomfortable to say “knives will be back on planes”, the reality is, they are already are. First class passengers receive knives with their meals. Knitting needles, tweezers and so many other sharp objects are permissible under today’s standards. And, as we all know, it is simply a fact that an active imagination can turn even the most innocuous-seeming object on an aircraft into a lethal weapon, should they have the intent.

And that is how I ultimately came to my most important decision – the only way to have truly risk-based security is to focus on the dangerous people, not just the dangerous objects. I cannot claim to have invented this notion. As anyone who has flown into or out of Ben Gurion Airport outside of Tel Aviv knows, this is exactly how the Israelis handle transportation security. Risk-based security is a method that, to date, has worked with great success for them and can in the United States as well if given the chance and resources.

However, this approach is neither simple nor inexpensive. TSOs need proper training. Currently, less than 10% of the work force has had such training, and behavior detection, as this type of security is called, is implemented in only a handful of airports. I hope this committee will focus on the need for more training and for broader implementation of the one method that, if correctly executed, is considered to be the gold standard of aviation security.

It saddens me that so much of the rhetoric surrounding the proposed changes to the PIL has focused on whether or not small blades can cause harm. Of course they can. No one disputes that. Does a flight attendant have every reason to worry about an unruly passenger

assaulting him or her with a blade? Of course he or she does. But that threat already exists, and will continue to exist even if all blades are banned. There are simply too many ways one can hypothesize that a member of the flight crew or a passenger could be harmed on an aircraft for that to be the discussion.

TSA's role is "to strengthen the security of the nation's transportation systems and ensure the freedom of movement for people and commerce." Even the 9/11 Commission, led by Governor Tom Kean and Congressman Lee Hamilton, now co-chairs of the Bipartisan Policy Center's Homeland Security Project, recognized the need to focus on the threats to the entire aircraft, recommending in their report that "The TSA and the Congress must give priority attention to improving the ability of screening checkpoint to detect explosives on passengers" (The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States: Official Government Edition, 2004).

While no one wants to see anyone injured on an aircraft, least of all those whose job it is to keep people safe, TSA simply cannot protect against every conceivable type of possible injury. Rather, TSA is looking to prevent catastrophic attacks, and they have come to the reasoned decision that those items proposed to be taken off the PIL cannot cause a catastrophic attack. I note that the box-cutters and mace instrumental to the attack on my mom's plane remain on the PIL.

I may be naïve, but I remain hopeful that ALL stakeholders (and I believe that is the entire American public) can agree that TSA has a very difficult, but important job, and that we all must come together to help them do it. If we disagree with a decision, we need to come up with a practical solution to the issue being addressed, not just complain. Instead of mocking the men and women who chose to be on the front lines of transportation security on shows like "Saturday Night Live" (something I will note would never be acceptable to do to other law enforcement or military personnel), we need to stand with them and accept that our safety and security is something we all need to be engaged in.

Finally, we need to remember that the threat facing our transportation sector is very real. While Richard Reid (who you might remember as the failed shoe bomber), Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab (otherwise known as the "underwear bomber"), and Ibrahim Hassan al-Asiri (the al Qaeda explosives expert believed to have constructed the printer cartridge bombs in 2010) may not be household names, their colleagues are still bent on causing destruction to American aircraft and American lives. We cannot rest on the success of TSOs, intelligence officials and countless others who have kept us safe since the day my mom boarded AA11 – we must be one step ahead of those looking to board future flights with intent to harm. We need to unite as a nation in this effort, and remember that we are all on the same side. I am grateful for the time

and effort that you and your dedicated staff are devoting to this most important issue and thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this hearing.