

United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE,
AND TRANSPORTATION

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6125

December 14, 2009

The Honorable Richard L. Skinner
Inspector General
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20528

Dear Mr. Skinner:

Several recent media reports have highlighted the fact that individuals with connections to terrorism and other criminal activities hold valid Airman Certificates issued by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). These reports are disturbing, and suggest that people who are believed to pose security threats to our nation continue to have ready access to aircraft and airport facilities. Given these reports, we are asking you to examine how the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) vets the names of individuals holding valid Airman Certificates and what actions TSA takes when it determines that a person holding a valid certificate presents a security threat.

Under a law Congress passed shortly after the 9/11 attacks, the TSA is responsible for vetting the FAA's Airmen Registration Database (ARD) for individuals who pose a threat to transportation security.¹ While it is our understanding that TSA and FAA have been collaborating since 2001 to vet the ARD for potential security threats, there appear to be weaknesses in the vetting system. Some individuals with terrorist connections have apparently gone undetected by TSA's vetting, while in other cases, security threats who have been identified during the vetting process have not lost their certification. We are aware that FAA and TSA have recently implemented a new vetting procedure that may correct many of the earlier shortcomings, but we still have concerns about the effectiveness of this process.

Given these concerns, we request that your office conduct a study of the Airmen Certificate vetting system. Specific questions we would like you to address include:


1. Is the current vetting process used by the FAA and TSA sufficient to detect individuals known to be threats to national security or transportation security, and to ensure that they no longer have a valid airman certificate?
2. Are there weaknesses in the vetting coordination process between the FAA and the TSA that need to be addressed?

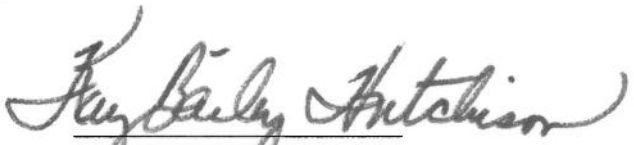
¹ 49 U.S.C. 114(h).

3. Are there additional agencies that should be included in the vetting process, that are not involved currently?
4. Does the process use the appropriate technology to match names on the ARD to names on other terrorist screening databases used by TSA and/or the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to identify individuals that pose a threat to national security or transportation security?
5. Are TSA and/or DHS matching the ARD against the appropriate terrorist screening databases in order to identify individuals known to be threats to national security or transportation security?

Please contact our staff, Gael Sullivan at (202) 224-9000, or Jarrod Thompson at (202) 224-8712, when you are ready to initiate this study.

Sincerely,


U. S. Senator John D. Rockefeller IV
Committee Chairman


U.S. Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison
Committee Ranking Member


U.S. Senator Byron L. Dorgan
Subcommittee Chairman


U.S. Senator Jim DeMint
Subcommittee Ranking Member