

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 23, 2019

The Honorable Kirstjen Nielsen  
Secretary of Homeland Security  
U.S. Department of Homeland Security  
3801 Nebraska Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20016

The Honorable Elaine Chao  
Secretary of Transportation  
U.S. Department of Transportation  
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE  
Washington, D.C. 20590

Dear Secretary Nielsen and Secretary Chao:

We are writing to express our concerns regarding the potential consequences that the lack of a fully operational government poses to nationwide travelers, as well as visitors traveling to and from the state of Nevada.

As you are already aware, the U.S. Government has been forced to operate under a lapse in appropriations since December 22, 2018, making it the longest shutdown in our nation's history.<sup>1</sup> Economists predict that this shutdown could reduce U.S. economic growth by \$8.7 billion, costing our nation \$1.5 billion per week, if it continues into February.<sup>2</sup> Federal employees within your Departments, particularly those who work under the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), and Customs and Border Protection (CBP), are among the 800,000 Americans, including 3,400 Nevadans, who have been furloughed or are being forced to work without pay.<sup>3</sup> Given the length of this crisis and uncertainty surrounding its conclusion, workforce capacity issues are likely to worsen and could result in significant operational impacts at airports across the country.

Thirty-four groups representing the aviation and travel industries outlined this concern in a letter to President Trump and Congressional leadership on January 10, 2019, stating: "As the shutdown continues, the human and economic consequences are increasing and doing greater harm. Civil aviation supports more than 7 percent of the U.S. gross domestic product (GDP) and \$1.5 trillion of economic impact, creating over 11.5 million jobs, but this shutdown is hampering our ability to function effectively."<sup>4</sup> This letter also outlined specific troubling impacts, including:

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<sup>1</sup> McCarthy, Niall. *The Current Government Shutdown Has Become The Longest In U.S. History*, Forbes, 14 Jan. 2019, [www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2019/01/14/the-current-government-shutdown-has-become-the-longest-in-u-s-history-infographic/#20e325f27945](http://www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2019/01/14/the-current-government-shutdown-has-become-the-longest-in-u-s-history-infographic/#20e325f27945).

<sup>2</sup> Davidson, Paul. *Government shutdown: How it could hurt the economy*, USA Today, 31 Dec. 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2018/12/31/government-shutdown-how-could-hurt-economy-and-volatile-market/2435168002/>.

<sup>3</sup> Price, Michelle L., and Scott Sonner. *US workers say they are struggling to survive shutdown*, Associated Press, 11 Jan. 2019, [www.apnews.com/ffa43fc8e45a4ab78feaf5f4d403e7ec](http://www.apnews.com/ffa43fc8e45a4ab78feaf5f4d403e7ec).

<sup>4</sup> <https://nbaa.org/wp-content/uploads/advocacy/letters/Aviation-Shutdown-Impacts-Ltr.pdf>

- Fewer Transportation Security Officers (TSO's) are available to screen travelers at security checkpoints, resulting in longer wait times and larger crowds forced to congregate in public areas of airports.
- All FAA safety reporting and oversight systems have been suspended.
- And the CBP closed its enrollment centers for the Global Entry program.
- Air Traffic Control workers are performing highly sensitive and technical work without pay and training of new controllers has been suspended despite a major shortage in the industry.

Additionally, some TSA agents have responded to the prolonged period without pay by requesting sick leave or submitting their resignations due to the heightened stress at home and work.<sup>5</sup> Recent reports revealed that unscheduled absences amongst TSA agents doubled on January 14, 2019 compared to statistics gathered on the same date in 2018. This raises serious concerns regarding the ability of these highly professional public servants to most effectively and safely perform their important jobs. Largely due to these inadequate and insufficient staffing levels at our airports, there has been an increase of longer wait times and partial closures of terminals and concourses at airports across the nation, including George Bush Intercontinental (Houston), Miami International, Washington Dulles International, and Hartsfield-Jackson International (Atlanta) Airports.<sup>6</sup> In an attempt to combat these problems, TSA Administrator David Pekoske recently announced a one-time bonus of \$500 for uniformed screening officers, "in recognition of their hard work during yet another busy holiday travel season, maintaining the highest of security standards during an extraordinary period."<sup>7</sup> This action indicates that the current situation is dramatically impacting the employees under your leadership and that more needs to be done on their behalf.

These issues are compounded in Nevada, where the economy heavily relies on tourists from around the world. This includes travelers coming to Reno and Lake Tahoe for recreational opportunities and convention goers in the Las Vegas Valley, all of which welcome over 56 million visitors a year, spending \$65.8 billion dollars and supporting over 492,000 jobs.<sup>8</sup> January and February are particularly busy months for tourism in our state as we welcomed over three million visitors and 600,000 convention attendees during each of the first two months of 2018 in Las Vegas alone. For example, the recently concluded 2019 Consumer Electronic Show (CES), was attended by a total of 182,198 people in 2018.<sup>9</sup>

Safe and efficient airport operations are vital to the careers and livelihood of a wide variety of Nevadans who have jobs in the hospitality and tourism industries. After recently meeting with these dedicated public servants, we reiterate to you the sacrifices they are making to provide for their families, pay their bills, and keep a roof over their heads. These individuals already hold the pressure of providing safety to traveling public and should not be burdened with the uncertainty of working without pay.

Ensuring that visitors feel welcome and safe to travel throughout the United States is vital to the economic stability of our country. That is why this shutdown is so disconcerting and why it raises

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<sup>5</sup> Thrush, Glenn. *T.S.A. Screeners, Working Without Pay, Are Calling Out Sick*, New York Times, 4 Jan. 2019, [www.nytimes.com/2019/01/04/us/politics/tsa-government-shutdown-sick-leave.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/04/us/politics/tsa-government-shutdown-sick-leave.html).

<sup>6</sup> Beasley, Stephanie. *Dulles closes screening lanes, lines sprawl in Atlanta as shutdown strains air travel*, 14 Jan. 2019, [www.politico.com/story/2019/01/14/government-shutdown-tsa-airports-lines-1081641](http://www.politico.com/story/2019/01/14/government-shutdown-tsa-airports-lines-1081641).

<sup>7</sup> Cook, Jeffrey. *On latest day of government shutdown, TSA absences more than double last year's rate*, ABC News, 13 Jan. 2019, [abcnews.go.com/US/latest-day-government-shutdown-tsa-absences-double-years/story?id=60348631](http://abcnews.go.com/US/latest-day-government-shutdown-tsa-absences-double-years/story?id=60348631).

<sup>8</sup> How Brand USA Promotes NEVADA, BrandUSA, [https://www.thebrandusa.com/system/files/files/Nevada\\_State\\_Fact\\_Sheet.pdf](https://www.thebrandusa.com/system/files/files/Nevada_State_Fact_Sheet.pdf)

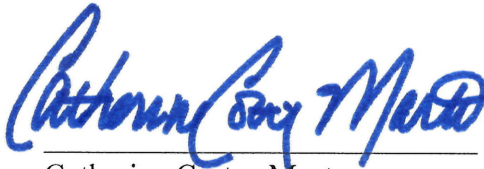
<sup>9</sup> *CES by the Numbers*, Consumer Technology Association, [www.ces.tech/About-CES/CES-by-the-Numbers.aspx](http://www.ces.tech/About-CES/CES-by-the-Numbers.aspx).

specific questions about the operations and security of our nation's airports. We respectfully request you provide information regarding the following questions:

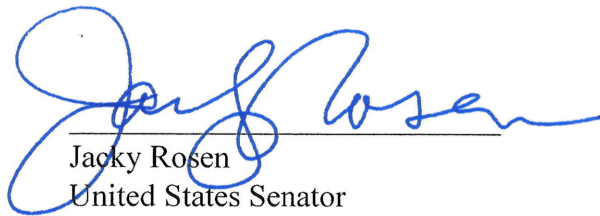
- What are your agencies' long-term strategies to ensure that there are no gaps in safety and efficiency at our nation's airports while this manufactured crisis continues?
- Do you have any specific plans to combat these problems at Reno-Tahoe International or McCarran International (Las Vegas) Airport?
- How are you addressing shortages when staff do not show up for work or quit?
- How are you addressing increased wait times at airports?
- How are you addressing the absence of safety-reporting systems and procedures? And what contingency plans are in place to ensure that all passengers and aircraft are appropriately screened?
- How are you addressing morale and mental health, including scheduling and pay concerns, to assist your personnel and reduce stress?
- Now, and upon the completion of the shutdown, how will you ensure the stability of the retention and recruitment process when employees and future candidates may be discouraged by the current situation?

Given the gravity of the situation, we request a written response to these questions by January 31, 2019. Thank you for your consideration and we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Catherine Cortez Masto  
United States Senator



Jacky Rosen  
United States Senator

CC:

Daniel K. Elwell, Acting Administrator, Federal Aviation Administration

Kevin K. McAleenan, Commissioner, Customs and Border Protection

David P. Pekoske, Administrator, Transportation Security Administration