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Congressman still faces airport screening problem

By BEN EVANS
Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON — Rep. John Lewis of Atlanta says a mix up on a terrorist watch list is still wreaking havoc on his air travel five years after the problem arose.

The 11-term Democratic congressman wrote to the House Homeland Security Committee this week that he's still subjected to repeated airport searches and required to present multiple forms of identification. The problem persists even though Homeland Security recently gave him a letter to show airlines that was supposed to clear things up.

If it's still happening to a congressman, he wrote, "you can only imagine what the average American suffers."

"I have been trying to get off (this list) for years," he wrote. "It is wrong."

Lewis' travel hassles — along with those of other high-profile figures such as Sen. Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts — began several years after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, as the government quickly expanded its watch lists. Airline officials have told Lewis that extra security is triggered because someone with a similar name is under suspicion.

On one occasion, a flight attendant speaking on the loudspeaker called for Lewis to identify himself in mid-flight. The attendant asked for his driver's license and questioned him, he said.

Transportation Security Administration spokesman Christopher White said Friday that Lewis is probably getting screened because airlines are misinterpreting security lists.

The agency submits three updated lists to the airlines daily, he said. One is a "no-fly" list for people not allowed to board planes. Another "selectee" list is for passengers requiring extra screening, and another "cleared" list is for safe passengers like Lewis who have been certified by Homeland Security after experiencing problems.

"Some airlines do a great job of matching the lists to the manifests, some do not," White said.

TSA hopes to improve the process by taking over the job from the airlines next year, he said.


A Lewis spokeswoman said the situation has improved, but he still must take extra precautions to avoid embarrassment, such as notifying TSA when he plans to fly.

On Friday, House Homeland Security Committee Chairman Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., wrote Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff to respond to Lewis' complaints. Thompson asked that Chertoff report to the committee how many other people with the name John Lewis have reported similar problems.

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