



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on December 12, 2011

Two N.Y. Senators Call for Passenger Advocates at Airports

As Americans become increasingly opposed to the intrusive and unconstitutional searching techniques of the Transportation Security Administration — including recent allegations by several women that they were strip-searched by airport security — two New York lawmakers on Sunday proposed the creation of “passenger advocates” at airports. However, their solution is highly controversial. The two men — U.S. Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y., left) and New York State Sen. Michael Gianaris — have stated that such a position should be created by the TSA itself, which critics point out would virtually undermine its purpose of passenger advocacy.



“We need to find the right balance between security and protecting vulnerable passengers,” insisted Schumer in the TWA terminal at JFK International Airport. He was joined by state [Sen. Michael Gianaris \(D-Queens\)](#) and the sons of the women who were allegedly strip-searched recently. He added:

Today, we’re calling on the TSA to give a voice to those who feel they may be inappropriately treated, or subject to totally onerous screening, by designating an on-site passenger advocate at every airport.

The proposal by Schumer and Gianaris followed the most recent complaint, levied by 85-year-old Lenore Zimmerman, who [asserted](#) that she was strip-searched at JFK Airport. She said she was taken to a private room by a member of the TSA and forced to remove her pants and other clothes after she asked to skip the screening because she believed it would interfere with her defibrillator. The entire ordeal forced her to miss her flight and catch an alternative flight nearly three hours later.

Im hunched over. Im in a wheelchair. I weigh under 110 pounds, she said. Do I look like a terrorist?

TSA officials issued a statement adamantly denying Zimmermans claims: “While we regret that the passenger feels she had an unpleasant screening experience, TSA does not include strip searches as part of our security protocols and one was not conducted in this case. Zimmerman indicated that she travels back and forth frequently between Florida and New York, and that she has always opted for a pat-down, fearing the impact the screening machines could have on her weak heart. She said that she never had a problem with the pat-downs until this most recent experience.

Zimmerman explained that during the most recent screening procedure, she banged her shin with her walker and it bled like a pig, because she is on blood thinners. She reported that she was treated by an emergency medical technician, but was told by the technician that she should go see a doctor when she arrived in Florida, though there is no record indicating Zimmerman received any medical attention while undergoing the procedure.



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I dont know what triggered this. I dont know why they singled me out, she said, indicating that she plans to sue the TSA.

But the TSA contended that the scenario was not as described by Zimmerman. Private screening was requested by the passenger, it was granted and lasted approximately 11 minutes, the TSA statement read. TSA screening procedures are conducted in a manner designed to treat all passengers with dignity, respect and courtesy and that occurred in this instance.

Video footage during the Zimmerman screening shows that proper procedure was followed at least during the initial screening, though there is no footage of the actual pat-down or alleged strip search.

But for Zimmermans son, Bruce, the TSAs assertion that the strip-search did not occur worsens the situation. For the TSA to come out and deny it, just added insult to injury, he commented, stressing that he felt guilty for not being able to protect his mother from the sort of abuse she suffered.

The TSA does admit, however, that a misunderstanding prompted the removal of the womans back brace, and that the agency will be retraining its JFK employees.

Regardless of the TSAs denial of the events, several similar claims have been made against the TSA in the past.

Ruth Sherman, 88, reported that she was strip-searched at JFK Airport's Jet Blue Terminal on November 28. Her son Bob explained: They pulled her pants down. She has a colostomy bag. They were touching it. She was crying and very upset. Whod want to do that to an 88-year-old?

As in the other cases, the TSA denied that the strip-search took place, prompting the ire of Ruth Shermans other son, Ralph. They basically called these women liars, he declared. My mother is willing to take an independent lie detector test I challenge the two TSA female agents to do the same.

The recent accusations [prompted](#) the two New York Senators to send a letter to both Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano and TSA Administrator John Pistole, proposing the new airport position. We must use common sense as we preserve safety, said State Senator Gianaris. Theres no good reason why an individual should be violated in such an outrageous manner.

The TSA has already announced the possibility of creating a passenger advocate position, presumably to protect its own interests in cases such as these. Saturday night, the TSA stated:

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) strives to provide the highest level of security while ensuring that all passengers are treated with dignity and respect. TSA has programs in place for the screening of people with all types of disabilities and medical conditions and their associated equipment.

We work regularly with a coalition of advocacy groups that represent those with disabilities and medical conditions to help TSA understand their conditions and adapt screening procedures accordingly.

According to TSA spokeswoman Kristin Lee, senior leadership spoke with national groups which advocate for passengers with medical conditions, particularly ones which require them to carry items such as colostomy bags. TSA agents allegedly stopped Ruth Sherman after noticing a bulge in her clothing, unaware that it was caused by a colostomy bag.

The TSA is also planning to create a toll-free phone hotline in January for those passengers who require help during screenings. The agency stated:



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This hotline will give passengers direct access to guidance and information specific to persons with disabilities or medical conditions, which they will be able to call prior to flying.

Additionally, TSA regularly trains its workforce on how to screen travelers with disabilities and medical conditions and has customer service managers at most airports to answer questions and assist passengers.

The Schumer-Gianaris proposal would provide for an advocate for passengers who feel that they have been inappropriately searched at the airport.

While the safety and security of our flights must be a top priority, we need to make sure that flying does not become a fear-inducing, degrading, and potentially humiliating experience, Sen. Schumer stated. "We can have security and convenience. We don't have to have it be an either-or situation."

I appreciate the TSAs work to keep air passengers safe, but passengers should not be humiliated and degraded during their travels, Gianaris added.



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