

Terror chief: 'Breakdown' in Charlotte

Case of Mecklenburg teen who may have hidden in plane spurs 'enormous concerns.'

BY AMES ALEXANDER

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A Massachusetts congressman called on the federal government Wednesday to make tarmac security a priority, citing the case of a 16-year-old who apparently climbed into the wheel well of a passenger jet in Charlotte.

"It really raised enormous concerns about aviation safety," U.S. Rep. William Keating told Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano at a congressional hearing Wednesday.

Napolitano, speaking publicly for the first time about the Delvonte Tisdale case, acknowledged there was an ap-

parent "breakdown" in the nation's airport security system when Tisdale stowed away inside a plane at Charlotte/Douglas International Airport. The Transportation

Security Administration is investigating the Nov. 15 incident, she said.

"Clearly if somebody - a 16-year-old - is able to circumvent (our) standards and requirements and get into the wheel well of a plane, there has been a breakdown," Napolitano said.

Michael Leiter, director of SEE TARMAC, 7A the National Counterterrorism Center, said he would work with Napolitano to determine whether there are broader problems with tarmac security.

Massachusetts investigators say they believe Tisdale breached security at the Charlotte airport and sneaked into the left wheel well of a US Airways plane bound for Boston's Logan Airport. Tisdale's battered body was found beneath the flight path in Milton, Mass. He may have fallen from the plane as the jet's landing gear was lowered on the approach to Boston.

Keating, elected to Congress in November, helped investigate Tisdale's death last year in his previous position as Norfolk County, Mass., district attorney. He questioned what might have happened if Tisdale had been "a person with more nefarious motivations."

In an interview following the House Homeland Security Committee hearing, Keating

told the Observer that while officials have taken extensive steps to beef up security at the gate since 9-11, there's been far less attention placed on airport perimeters.

"To me, all the good work done inside the airport is not adequate if the tarmac and perimeter is not secured the way it should be," said Keating, a Democrat. "It's like locking all the doors and leaving the windows open. ... This is a threat to the whole country."

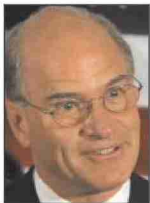
Keating said Tisdale wasn't spotted in any of the footage taken by the Charlotte airport's video cameras. Authorities may never learn how he got to the plane, the congressman said.

But as Massachusetts investigators saw it, perimeter security at the Charlotte airport "was not that great," Keating said.

Charlotte's massive airfield is surrounded by a 6-foot-high chain-link fence topped with three strands of barbed wire. Several airport security experts interviewed by the Observer last month said such fences are easily breached.

Charlotte airport director Jerry Orr said last month that the airport spends "a great deal of money and effort" to keep unauthorized people off its airfield. But he declined to talk about what his airport does - or how much it spends - to protect its perimeter, saying he does not want to compromise security.

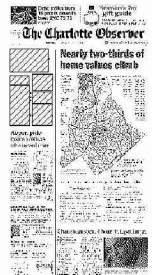
Some US Airways employees speculate that Tisdale might have gotten to the plane by traveling with or behind an employee who had authorized access to the airfield. Orr says he believes the security procedures in place make that "piggybacking" theory unlikely. He declined to elaborate.



Keating



Napolitano



The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department has convened a task force to investigate the Tisdale case. Police officials have not disclosed who is on the task force or what it's learning.

Tisdale, a sophomore at North Mecklenburg High, was a member of the school's ROTC program. His family has retained lawyers who contend the security system failed. A lawsuit may help the family determine precisely what happened, says Christopher Chestnut, one of the lawyers.

"The family of Delvonte deserves answers," Chestnut said recently. "And the American people deserve answers about such a severe breach of security."

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Members of Congress want to know how a Charlotte teen who had never flown before penetrated the security system at Charlotte/Douglas International Airport.