

TESTIMONY BEFORE
THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
AND THE SENATE SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT OF GOVERNMENT
MANAGEMENT, RESTRUCTURING AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
ON
“HAS AIRLINE SECURITY IMPROVED?”

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BY

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Good Morning Chairmen and Members of the Committee.

My name is Jacqueline Mathes and I have been a flight attendant for United Airlines for almost 29 years. I am a proud member of the Association of Flight Attendants, AFL-CIO, and I am here today representing AFA's 50,000 members at 26 carriers. I am currently on voluntary furlough through January 30, 2002. I chose to take the three-month furlough in the hopes that my sacrifice will help save a flying partner's job. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify today at this important hearing on aviation security.

Even though I have not worked a flight since November 1st, I know firsthand, from flying after September 11th and talking with my flying partners, what air security is like today. We have all heard the horrific story of the security breach in my hometown, Chicago, earlier this month: a passenger nearly made it onboard with a number of knives, mace and a stun gun. Luckily, a random search was conducted on this passenger, but only after he had successfully cleared the metal detectors. And despite the fact that he was detained in Chicago, his checked luggage - which could have contained explosives - was not pulled off the plane. That case caught national media attention because of the audacity and severity of the security breach. But after September 11th, we all learned that those who want to slip weapons through the current security system will find a way unless we work -- quickly -- to change that system.

Soon after September 11th, the FAA immediately put new security requirements in place. Simply put, these changes did not improve airport and airline security -- they were merely window dressing. Airlines were required to conduct searches of the cabins for weapons or bombs.

Without trained security staff, airlines instead gave the duty to perform these searches to their flight attendants, who were not trained in security checks. A carry-on baggage limit to one bag plus one personal item per passenger is confusing and has not been enforced. Placing National Guard at the airport has only ensured that there is a military presence at the security screening areas in airports; but the Guard does not help with the actual screening process in any way. A

call for better-trained federal screeners has not been acted on, and we know all the serious breaches that have occurred so far. A requirement that all cockpit and cabin crew meet before each flight to discuss security plans has been met with opposition from the airlines, who are far more concerned about on-time departures. Flight attendants are pressured every day by airline management to speed-up or simply skip vital security measures in order to maintain on-time departures.

Despite these new security requirements, flight attendants still believe there are far too many loopholes -- large enough loopholes to allow for another terrorists attack on the airlines. Flight attendants are well aware of these serious gaps in security. Every day we go to work to ensure the safety of our passengers. That is what we are trained to do. In the air, we are the fire fighters, the law enforcement agents, the first aid responders, and the comforters to our passengers. On September 11th, the 12 flight attendants onboard United Flights 93 and 175 became the last line of defense in protecting the cockpit and passengers. All 12 lost their lives in the performance of their duties that fateful day.

Since September 11th, our lives and work have changed dramatically. We are now faced with frightening prospects of what could happen again, and we are, quite frankly, well aware of how easily another terrorist attack could occur. Are we more confident in the safety of air travel since September 11th? No. Do we believe that the new security changes put in place by the FAA since September 11th have made a difference? No. Are we sure when we board an airplane that it is weapon-free? No. Do we believe that air travel can be safe? Yes, eventually. But much needs to be done.

Before I talk about what changes need to be made, let me give you examples of how different life is today for flight attendants. What is most unnerving to me is that flight attendants now start each trip by discussing what we can use on the aircraft for weapons. We actually talk about breaking wine bottles to use as weapons to protect ourselves in case of a terrorist attack. In eight weeks, not a single flight attendant has received any type of new training on terrorists attacks or how to protect themselves or the passengers. Without any additional training from the airlines and working in a failed security system, flight attendants believe they must prepare themselves for any emergencies. We believe another terrorist attack can happen -- and we want to be as prepared as possible. It is horrific that we have gotten to the point of talking about disarming, injuring or killing terrorists onboard aircraft. This is the main way life has changed for me since September 11th.

Like all other travelers, flight attendants have first-hand knowledge of changes in the check-in process and screening process. Yet, I do not believe any changes in place today have made air travel more secure. In fact, on October 18th, security screening at O'Hare found a small hotel sewing kit in my bag. The kit contained thread, a few sewing needles and a small pair of three-inch metal sewing scissors -- scissors that barely cut thread. I had forgotten that I had the sewing kit in my bag. It was a sewing kit that I had always carried with me in case I had to mend my uniform while working. It had been in my bag for months, well before September 11th, and for all my flights between September 11th and October 18th. This was the first time any screener had seen it and while I did not fault the screener from taking it from my bag, it was clear that more needs to be done to screen bags. Why was this overlooked by every screener on every flight until

this one screener spotted it? If she had not spotted it, the kit would still be in my bag. How can we be assured that all weapons are being spotted and removed? This must be resolved and fixed immediately.

Other stories that I have heard clearly show that the screening process continues to fail. Crewmembers continue to report that potential weapons are passing through security. Flight attendants report finding passengers with scissors, pen knives, steak knives, Swiss Army knives, screwdrivers, razor blades, box cutters and even knitting needles. Despite the fact that small nail clippers, and in my case a tiny sewing scissor, are being taken from crewmembers, passengers are managing to get on board with all types of weapons.

In addition, most airline catering and service personnel continue to service aircraft without passing through screening. Flight attendants are finding potential weapons on-board at an alarming rate. It is crucial that all airline employees who come into contact with a plane pass through security screening. Box cutters are still found too often on aircraft. We must screen everyone with access to the airplanes and other secure airport space.

In one alarming example, one AFA member has been terminated and another is facing severe discipline, after their flight was canceled following the discovery of a box cutter in the cockpit. The box cutter was found on the first flight out in the morning. The Captain stated that no box cutter was in the cockpit after the final flight the day before. When the flight attendants reported to the plane, there were already one FBI agent, five Boston Police and one representative from the carrier onboard. The flight attendants were asked to help conduct a thorough security inspection of the entire aircraft to make sure no other weapons were hidden onboard even though they had no proper inspection training. The FBI then requested that a search be conducted using dogs. Despite these searches, and given that the FBI still seemed concerned, the crew was uncomfortable about taking that particular aircraft with the scheduled passengers and suggested they move to another plane. The carrier refused to switch airplanes. The flight attendants were also uncomfortable with the entire security procedures and their role in those procedures as untrained "consultants" to the law enforcement specialists. They express these concerns to the Pilot in Command and he elected to cancel the flight. The carrier is now disciplining the flight attendants for the flight's cancellation.

On a daily basis, flight attendants are witnessing severe security scrutiny on our flying partners, yet less than severe scrutiny on the flying public. Flight crews have seemingly been targeted for extensive searches by the private security guards, while passengers pass through checkpoints without a second glance. Female flight attendants have been fondled and groped by male security guards. A female flight attendant passing through security at San Francisco Airport was repeatedly rubbed all over her body with a screening wand wielded by a male security guard. A pregnant flight attendant based in Portland, Oregon, whose buttons on her maternity blouse set off metal detectors was subjected to a body search. Reports of this abusive behavior come at the same time that we continue to see well-publicized instances of major security breaches at airports across the country. While we strongly recognize the importance of vigilant security screening to keep weapons from being brought onboard aircraft, this behavior is unacceptable and does not move us to a truly safe and secure airline industry.

AFA believes that Congress must move forward on the following recommendations to ensure that this industry is as safe as it can possibly be.

*We must federalize the security screeners through the Department of Justice, just as the Senate voted to do in its bill last month.

*We must update and improve flight attendant training. Today, the FAA requires carriers to provide minimum training on hijacking situations. The training is grossly outdated and falls far short of addressing the new reality that flight attendants face on the aircraft. Training procedures must be updated to include appropriate and effective responses to terrorism as it exists today. The training should be realistic and include self-defense and training in non-lethal weapons if they are required in the cabin.

*Strict limits for carry-on baggage must be enforced. Reducing carry-on baggage by imposing a single standard that clearly and strictly limits carry-on baggage is imperative and must be done immediately. It is clear that screeners are currently examining far too many bags, some of which are extremely large, in too short a time frame. This makes proper scanning difficult, if not impossible. If Congress is serious about preventing terrorists from bringing weapons onboard an aircraft, then you must take action to limit the amount and size of carry-on baggage.

*Congress must take immediate action to ensure the safety and security of on-board supplies, carry-on baggage and all checked bags by screening everything that goes on an airplane. In addition, the airlines must put a 100% passenger/baggage match in place immediately. This will ensure that only the baggage belonging to passengers who actually board aircraft is carried on that aircraft and that all other "unaccompanied" bags are removed from the aircraft.

*Congress must also ensure that all passengers and individuals with access to secure areas are screened and checked.

As a flight attendant, I take pride in my role as an aviation safety professional, and I am pleased to have the opportunity to tell you what needs to be done to make our skies as safe as we know how. While we are pleased that the carriers have quickly fortified the cockpit doors, little has been done to protect passengers and flight attendants, who remain the first and last line of defense on the aircraft. We must move quickly to make the skies safe -- to protect aviation workers and passengers when they fly. If we leave just one loophole in the system, terrorists will exploit it. I urge you to move swiftly on the adoption of these crucial security procedures in order to build a truly secure and safe aviation environment. We must do everything we can to protect flight attendants, and all airline employees and passengers from future terrorist attacks. Restoring faith in air travel is paramount.

Thank you for allowing me to testify before you, and I welcome any questions from the Senators.