

ASSOCIATION OF FLIGHT ATTENDANTS – CWA, AFL-CIO



TESTIMONY OF

COLBY ALONSO
AFA COUNCIL 89 LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS CHAIR

BEFORE

THE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY
SUBCOMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION SECURITY

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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Thank you Chairman Rogers and Ranking Member Jackson-Lee and members of the Committee for holding this hearing and allowing me to speak on our perspectives on the future of transportation security. My name is Colby Alonso and I am a 16 year flight attendant and a member of the Association of Flight Attendants – Communication Workers of America (AFA). AFA represents nearly 60,000 Flight Attendants at 21 different airlines and is the world’s largest Flight Attendant union. We appreciate having the opportunity to testify at today’s hearing on “Challenging the Status Quo at TSA: Perspectives on the Future of Transportation Security.”

A Flight Attendant’s duty as a first responder in the aircraft cabin is to ensure the safety, health and security of passengers. We receive training in fire fighting, first aid, aircraft evacuation, and emergency procedures. Following the 9/11 attacks, Flight Attendants have been assigned increased responsibilities for ensuring the security of passengers on the aircraft and for protecting the flight deck and cabin from an attack.

This key role in security gives Flight Attendants an important perspective on the roles and responsibilities of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and other agencies that regulate U.S. homeland security. We are pleased to have an opportunity today to share AFA’s recommendations on some improvements that can be made to the U.S. aviation security and to express our continued strong support for a federalized TSA workforce, expedited screening for all airline crewmembers, self defense training for flight attendants, and to propose the acquisition and deployment of equipment that will assist in responding to emerging security threats.

I take pride in my role as an onboard aviation safety and security professional. I appreciate the opportunity to share with you my experience of May 22, 2012 as a front-line first responder. I was working as the French Language of Destination/Origin (LOD/O) translator on US Airways flight 787 from Paris, France to Charlotte, North Carolina.

As the LOD/O I was at the boarding door during the passenger boarding process, during which time I noticed nothing out of the ordinary. Our flight boarded and departed as normal. However, following our initial in-flight service, things began to change. A female passenger called me to her seat and handed me a note, written in French, and asked me to deliver it to the Captain.

Since the Captain did not speak French I asked her if I could read it. She said yes. The summary of statements from the note were as follows: She was coming to the U.S. to ask for assistance in saving her life. The note claimed said she had been used as a guinea pig by doctors for the past 10 years, and that she had undergone surgery against her will. She believed that she had been surgically implanted with a device that was out of her control. She said she was afraid to return to France and afraid for her safety because of things she had written.

After I had read the letter and reviewed the details with her, I reconfirmed that my translation was a reflection of her thoughts. I asked her if she thought the device would only harm her or if it could harm others or the aircraft. She apologized and appeared to be remorseful and scared and said she didn't know and could not confirm it wouldn't.

I went to the forward galley with the note and briefly explained to the "A" flight attendant the circumstances of the situation and then went into the cockpit to brief the Captain. I had taken a

copy of her writings, boarding pass and passport with me.

The captain's recommendation was to make an announcement requesting doctors on board because a passenger needed medical care. It took two announcements before one person in coach and one in first class rang their call buttons. I asked them to come to the forward galley and explained the situation quietly to them. I requested their help and discretion. I asked the female passenger to come to the back galley. She did and I interpreted for the doctors asking her permission to examine her. She agreed and showed them multiple scars where she believed incisions were made. They palpated those areas looking for protrusions or abnormalities.

The doctors then gave me their thoughts. They both agreed that given her weight and build they would be able to see and feel if something was implanted. They also believed the scars looked more like ones resulting from an accident and not from a recent surgery. Their joint assessment was that there was nothing visible or tangible to indicate she posed any threat. I relayed this information to the Captain.

It was decided that out of caution we would divert to Bangor, Maine. At the captain's request I asked the passenger if she would come to the back of the aircraft with me again and she agreed. We escorted her and her belongings to the rear of the aircraft. I was given instructions to restrain the passenger; which she willingly allowed. At the same time we had someone sit in the same row with her on the inboard seat to block her egress to the aisle.

Once on the ground in Bangor immigration/customs officers came on and removed her via the aft left aircraft stairs. They took all her belongings with them. Once she was removed, the captain came on the PA system and explained the real circumstances to the passengers. The FBI came on and took my statement, the original note, and my rough translation.

Our flight eventually continued on to Charlotte where our crew was met by our airline base managers, chief pilot, and corporate security where we were debriefed and gave our statements. Representatives from AFA's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) were also available to support us as needed. We addressed the situation that day the best we could given our limited resources in the operational environment. Fortunately, the threat we encountered did not involve a terrorist; if it had it would have probably ended tragically.

Shortly after the 9/11 attacks AFA called upon Congress to implement many changes, some of which we continue to work toward today. I would now like to elaborate on several of AFA's security recommendations that I believe will help our industry continue to move forward and remain vigilant in pursuit of a safer and more secure aviation industry.

Every 12 months I am required to attend "recurrent" training at my airline to remain qualified to perform my safety, health and security duties onboard the aircraft. Part of that recurrent training includes a security module. I believe my training gave me sufficient resources to respond to the limited, fortunately non-serious threat encountered that day. I should note that my carrier's training program meets today's regulatory requirements.

The current “Common Strategy II” training requirements were created after the events of 2001 to replace the outdated 1970’s scenario of a dissident hijacker who wanted to go to Cuba. The old strategy emphasized a negotiated resolution. Flight attendants were unprepared to deal with the September 11 attacks, primarily because flight attendant training had stagnated. AFA had been and continues to be a consistent advocate for improving flight attendant training. AFA participated in the writing of the Common Strategy II guidance to update and improve flight attendant security training requirements in response to the 9/11 threat. The goal was to ensure crewmembers had the information, skills and tools necessary to respond to a new form of security threat.

Now more than 10 years since the inception of Common Strategy II, AFA recommends that flight attendant security training be reviewed and updated to ensure that training programs and procedures ensure appropriate, efficient and effective responses to current and emerging threats. Otherwise, we run the risk of again stagnating with our approach to security training as we did in the years before 9/11. We need a robust system that can counter current and emerging threats, and ensure that we have the best possible security system in place. AFA’s recommendations for an efficient, robust, layered security approach incorporates intensive modules on self-defense and situational awareness into crewmember security training, implements a Known Crewmember system as part of a risk-based approach to security screening, and utilizes discreet, portable wireless communication devices for two-way communications between cabin and flight deck personnel.

Flight attendant self defense training is an essential component of a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy. Today basic security training provided by air carriers includes actual hands-on self defense training that varies from 5 minutes to 30 minutes. This training module is developed and provided by the air carrier themselves, and is in compliance with existing requirements.

Despite repeated requests by AFA and others for updated training that includes basic self defense maneuvers to allow flight attendants to defend themselves against a terrorist attack, we still do not receive mandatory training about how to effectively recognize suspect terrorist behavior and how to defend ourselves and others against terrorist attacks aboard the aircraft. We are not asking for flight attendants to be certified black belt martial arts experts. We are asking for flight attendants to be provided with the appropriate and effective training that is required to perform our duties as first responders and the last line of defense for the flight deck.

There is alternate self defense training developed by TSA called Crew Member Self-Defense Training (CMSDT). This is a voluntary one-day (6 to 8-hour) course conducted throughout the year at various locations around the country such as community colleges and focuses on hands-on self defense training. I voluntarily took the course. It was done on my day off in Charlotte, NC. I was not paid nor did I receive any financial assistance to attend. I thought the training was a good start. Every year at recurrent training when our instructors ask if anyone has taken this class I enthusiastically raise my hand. AFA has long called for making the concepts of this voluntary self-defense training mandatory.

For more than five years AFA has also pressed for alternative screening for Flight Attendants that accurately reflects our credentials as pre-screened safety professionals. Our advocacy on

alternative screening methods is all the more important and relevant as the TSA moves to implement risk-based passenger security screening.

Flight Attendants are subject to the same level of screening and background checks as pilots, with the exception of those pilots participating in the FFDO program. As my testimony today reflects, Flight Attendants are an integral part of the crew and the purpose of our jobs is to ensure inflight safety and security. As a flight crewmember I have access to the cockpit and sometimes my presence in the cockpit is required. Unfortunately, Flight Attendants are still not included in the same alternative screening as pilots. TSA has stated that a similar screening process is contemplated for Flight Attendants, but concrete dates or milestones have yet to be announced.

While TSA continues to consider when to include Flight Attendants in the Known Crewmember (KCN) Program, the agency has announced that pilots from additional airlines will be included, and that other alternative screening initiatives for frequent travelers and active duty service members are being developed. AFA supports risk-based screening initiatives designed to make the screening process more efficient without sacrificing security. Flight Attendants should be recognized for the security and safety our presence ensures, and should therefore participate in alternative screening. To support security program efficiency and traveler convenience, TSA should move quickly to include *all* crewmembers in KCM.

Flight Attendants have access to the flight deck and are subject to the same 10-year background checks as pilots. Like pilots, we carry a certificate issued by the Federal Aviation Administration. We encourage this Committee to request a report from TSA establishing milestones for including Flight Attendants in an expedited, alternate screening program as mandated for all crewmembers by the 9/11 Commission Act. Other stakeholders agree, as both ALPA and A4A have requested that the TSA expand the program to include Flight Attendants.

We are disappointed with the slow implementation of Flight Attendants into KCM. The time is now to rectify the situation. Passengers are being invited to opt-in to expedited security screening programs simply because they log a certain number of miles on U.S. carriers. The nation's certified Flight Attendants, serving as the last line of defense for commercial aviation security, surely meet the requirements of the Known Crewmember Program.

Finally, since the aircraft we were flying that day was an older Boeing 767, the only way to communicate during the event to the authorities was through the flight deck headset. When I was recounting the information from the doctors about the exam to our ground support group I had to use the headset in the flight deck.

AFA has supported the development of discreet, secure, hands-free, wireless communications systems, as authorized by the Homeland Security Act of 2002, as one means to prevent a potentially catastrophic security breach by terrorists. The device will allow all crewmembers the ability to communicate from anywhere in the aircraft at any time under any circumstance. Each personal device must have capability for encrypted, bidirectional communications to allow plain language communications during crisis situations; this will ensure security and reduce confusion.

Security of the system is further ensured through use of dedicated hardware components that are accessible only to authorized personnel such as crewmembers and, potentially, any active law enforcement officers who may have presented credentials to the crew prior to the flight. The hands-free concept will allow crewmembers under both general emergency (e.g., medical crises, emergency evacuations) and security threat conditions to use their hands to protect themselves, the cockpit, other crewmembers, passengers, and the aircraft while continuing to coordinate and communicate with the cockpit, the ground, and the rest of the crew.

Before I end I would like to comment in support of TSA Administrator Pistole's efforts to limit privatization of security services at additional airports. AFA opposes any measures that would require the TSA Administrator to allow more privatization. There are many advantages to a federalized screening workforce. Federalized airport screening has been a success and has improved the security of air travel. A federalized workforce provides stability throughout our nation's airports by providing a multi-layered aviation security system from the time a passenger buys a ticket to the time a passenger exits the airport.

When our members encounter discrepancies, a federalized workforce allows us an efficient means to resolve discrepancies through a central organization versus trying to determine which screening company works in which airport and then searching for the appropriate contact person. A federal screening workforce also ensures that TSA can adapt quickly to emerging threats and allows greater flexibility to transfer personnel from one location to another in times of emergency or crisis. In a study earlier this year conducted by TSA and examined by the Government Accountability Office (GAO), it is estimated that the cost to TSA of contracted screening is generally between 3 and 9 percent more than the cost of Federal screening. Thus, federalized screeners actually cost the taxpayer less than private screeners.

In conclusion, Flight Attendants are first responders and since 9/11 we have also taken on the role as the last line of defense for commercial aviation security. Flight Attendants routinely identify and manage threat levels, use our training to de-escalate threats, and provide direction to passengers willing to assist in restraining assailants. We are charged with protecting the cockpit at all costs, including the loss of our own lives. Security doesn't just happen; over one hundred thousand Flight Attendants working in the U.S. aviation system ensure that our skies are safe.

Chairman Rogers and Ranking Member Jackson-Lee, thank you for allowing me to talk about being a front line employee and the last line of defense in the aircraft cabin. As my testimony proves flight attendants are trained to perform their jobs and handle any circumstances that may arise. There is still much work to be done. There needs to be an independent panel of subject matter experts commissioned by Congress to evaluate the efficacy of security training to ensure we have the training and tools that meet the changing threats. And, as a safety professional, who's demonstrated that my duties should entitle me to the same screening process as my flight deck flying partners it is way past time to allow flight attendants to participate in the Known Crewmember screening program.

Thank you.