



ASSOCIATION OF FLIGHT ATTENDANTS – CWA, AFL-CIO

TESTIMONY OF

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BEFORE

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SECURITY AND HOMELAND SECURITY
COMMITTEE

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Thank you Chairman Rogers and Ranking Member Jackson-Lee for holding this hearing and allowing us to weigh in on the safety and security issues that are important to flight attendants. My name is Christopher Witkowski and I am the Director of the Air Safety, Health and Security Department at the Association of Flight Attendants – Communication Workers of America (AFA-CWA). AFA-CWA represents more than 60,000 members at 23 airlines and has been advocating for the flight attendant profession for over 65 years.

I am here to talk about what has happened, or in this case, what has not happened to flight attendant security and self defense training in the 10 years since the horrific attacks of 9-11. Flight attendants are the first responders on commercial airplanes responsible for the protection and preservation of the cabin environment as well as the lives of over 630 million people annually. Safe and secure travel depends on the ability of flight attendants to identify and respond to threats to passenger health and the safety and security of the aircraft cabin and flight deck. Flight attendants are certified by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and complete mandatory, comprehensive training. Flight Attendants are trained to respond in the event of smoke and fire incidents, passenger and crewmember medical emergencies, cardio-pulmonary resuscitation, aircraft evacuation and other emergency situations.

Flight attendants are also the last line of defense in the aircraft cabin. Recognizing their security role Congress has, on separate occasions, passed laws mandating flight attendant self defense training. In every one of those statutes, Congress has said that “Each air carrier providing scheduled passenger air transportation shall; carry out a training program for flight and cabin crew members to prepare the crew members for potential threat conditions.” 49 USC 44918(a). While flight attendants have been waiting for mandatory comprehensive security training, flightdeck doors have been reinforced to resist intrusion. Some pilots have been armed under the Federal Flightdeck Officer (FFDO) program. The number of Federal Air Marshalls (FAMs) traveling on flights has increased – although there are still not enough to protect every flight. Flight attendants, an integral part of the crew in terms of safety and security, have been subjected to the same level of screening and background checks as pilots. Yet only pilots are being included in a beta test of the Known Crewmember screening process that allows expedited crewmember screening at security check points. Flight attendants are not yet included in this process. There are also discussions about installing secondary flightdeck barrier devices on aircraft as well as consideration for compensating FFDOs for their costs associated with training and supplies.

Flight attendant security issues have continually taken a “coach” seat when it comes to issues surrounding security training and expedited crew screening. Congress intended for flight attendants to receive training but, corporate pressure and agency prejudice have interfered with Congressional intent. I am here to say that training and equality for flight attendants remains elusive.

Despite our repeated requests for updated training which include basic self defense maneuvers to allow us to defend ourselves against a terrorist attack, flight attendants still

do not receive mandatory training about how to effectively recognize suspect terrorist behavior and how to defend themselves 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 effect training required to perform their duties as first responders and the last line of defense. It needs to be recognized that flight attendant self-defense training is an essential part of a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy

As previously stated, Congress has passed laws mandating flight attendant self defense training. The first was the 2001 Aviation and Transportation Security Act (ATSA) which passed just two months after the 9-11 attacks. Prior to ATSA, flight attendants were instructed to slow down their actions and comply with hijacker requests. The goal prior to 9-11 was to allow time to get the aircraft to a safe landing where law enforcement would then negotiate with the hijackers.

ATSA required the FAA to update and improve flight attendant security training requirements in response to new threats. This required air carrier flight attendant training programs to be updated and changed to reflect the current security and hijacking situations that flight attendants may face onboard the aircraft. No longer could we anticipate cooperation and negotiation as the outcome for a hijacking. Planes had become missiles and weapons of mass destruction.

It was Congress' intention – and AFA-CWA's expectation – that all carriers, across the industry would implement similar, if not identical, training programs. Unfortunately, there was a wide variance in the type of training and the hours spent on the training. In a 2002 survey of our Safety committee chairs we learned that some airlines were giving their flight attendants a minimal amount of training – in some cases two or three hours of up-dated hijacking training. Worse yet, some carriers made the necessary self-defense training component voluntary. Alarming, at the time, other carriers stated they would not provide potentially life saving self defense training at all.

These discrepancies in the security training in the aviation system left flight attendants unprepared for dealing with future terrorist attacks onboard an aircraft in the post 9-11 environment. AFA-CWA has been consistent in our advocacy that all flight attendants, regardless of the carrier employing them, must receive the same level of security training.

With the passage of ATSA, AFA-CWA began to urge Congress to change the requirements for flight attendant security training to include a provision that mandated a set number of hours for the security training. These mandates would have to be enforced so that all carriers would be required to provide the same level of adequate security training for all flight attendants.

In a rush to protect the flightdeck there was a flurry of legislation written to protect pilots. During the spring of 2002, as legislation was moving in the House and Senate that would allow pilots to carry fire arms, AFA-CWA asked that Congress mandate flight attendant self defense training at all carriers, with the training requirements and guidelines to be

developed by the new Transportation Security Agency (TSA). Both of these provisions were combined in what became the Homeland Security Act.

The final legislation of the Homeland Security Act included language that would require TSA to issue a rule mandating a set number of hours for extensively detailed flight attendant security and self defense training that must be implemented by all carriers and would be mandatory for all flight attendants. While not completely satisfied with the final language, AFA-CWA began to work closely with TSA and those developing the training curriculum and guidelines in order to guarantee that the training requirements and the final rule issued by the TSA would be as strong and comprehensive as possible.

Airline management, who has been strongly opposed to any efforts that would require them to abide by any industry wide training standards, opposed AFA-CWA efforts every step of the way and have even attempted a number of back door efforts to completely gut requirements for flight attendant security training.

In early 2003, air carries made an unsuccessful attempt to insert a provision into the Omnibus Appropriations Act that would allow carriers to design their own security training effectively making the requirement by the TSA for self defense training voluntary. Fortunately, Senator John McCain spoke out against this provision and it was defeated. The airlines had also tried to prevent industry wide standards for the security training and eliminate self-defense training completely.

The airlines finally succeeded in crippling the training requirements with the final language of Vision 100, the FAA Reauthorization of 2003. This was done by eliminating the requirement for TSA to issue a rule requiring both classroom and effective hands-on situational security training. In its stead, Vision 100 created two approaches to self defense security training. To understand the two approaches of training it is important to understand the basic elements of the law and guidance that are required for crewmember security training. Air carries are required to provide security training. Vision 100 required air carriers to provide training that included the following elements:

- Recognizing suspicious activities;
- Determination of the seriousness of any occurrence;
- Crew communication and coordination;
- Psychology of terrorists to cope with hijacker behavior and passenger responses;
- Situational training exercises regarding various threat conditions; and
- Appropriate responses to defend oneself.

The carriers provide this basic security training on an annual basis to flight attendants. As noted above, one of the elements is a requirement for “appropriate responses to defend oneself.” Vision 100 originally required that TSA establish minimum standards in relation to the training that would be provided to crewmembers including the element related to an “appropriate response to defend oneself.”

Unfortunately, at the last minute, Continental Airlines asked House Leader Tom DeLay to change one word in the security training provisions. He had the provision that said

“TSA **shall** establish minimum standards” changed to “TSA **may** establish minimum standards”. By changing this one word, he took away the ability to force TSA to issue these standards. The result was that TSA was not required or mandated to issue meaningful standards for crucial, mandatory flight attendant security training.

The subsequent result of the change in language is that the basic security training provided by air carriers in relation to “self defense” training includes anywhere from 5 minutes to 30 minutes of actual hands-on self defense training. So when we talk about “basic” security training in our comments we are talking about a 5 to 30 minute self-defense training module developed and provided by the air carrier themselves. While Congress established the TSA to develop and oversee transportation security programs, according to a September 2005 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report on *Aviation Security; Flight and Cabin Crew Member Security Strengthened, but Better Planning and Internal Controls Needed*, TSA stated that the agency believed it is the individual air carriers themselves who are responsible for establishing performance goals for these training programs. TSA’s reluctance to carry out its oversight capabilities has resulted in a further watering down of flight attendant security training programs. The report continued by noting that TSA also lacked adequate internal controls for monitoring and reviewing the air carriers’ security training.

Even without clear direction from Congress, TSA has the authority to implement comprehensive and cohesive security and self-defense training for all flight attendants but, has failed to do so. The House of Representatives passed the TSA Authorization Act, HR. 2200 in 2009, due to TSA’s continued inability to provide oversight on security training requirements. H.R. 2200 directed the TSA to develop a biennial, five hour; self-defense training that includes developing performance measures and strategic goals for air carriers. The Senate failed to take action on this bill so AFA-CWA’s efforts failed.

There should be a mandatory basic counterterrorism training that effectively prepares flight attendants to deal with potential threat conditions that Congress has required since the enactment of ATSA in November 2001. What is being provided in the voluntary “Crew Member Self Defense Training” (CMSDT) by TSA is not advanced, but an introduction to basic self-defense. The law intended for this type of security training to be provided in mandatory basic security training for flight attendants. CMSDT was intended to train more advanced techniques to volunteers who had previously been trained to ‘defend themselves,’ 49 USC 44918 (a)(2)(D), and to demonstrate what they have learned in “situational training exercises regarding various threat conditions.” 49 USC 44918(a)(2)(G).

Flight attendant security and self defense training was meant to provide the appropriate and effective response to a threat to the aircraft. When asked about the effectiveness of the training our flight attendant representatives said it appeared the air carrier met the requirements of the law. However, when asked if their air carrier’s security training prepared them to **defend** themselves and the flight deck should a terrorist attack occur on their aircraft, they’ve said “No, not really. Only superficially”. So while some would say that flight attendants don’t want additional security training, the opposite is true. Our

flight attendants actually believe that more training is necessary to help defend themselves in order to protect the passengers and flightdeck.

The second training developed in response to self defense training only is the voluntary CMSDT sponsored by TSA. This is a one-day (6 to 8 hour) course conducted throughout the year at various locations, such as community colleges around the country and focuses on hands-on self defense training. Unfortunately it is difficult for our members to attend the training as it has become harder for them to take off from work. The airline bankruptcies which resulted in dramatic pay cuts requiring flight attendants to work more days for the same amount of pay has made it is burdensome for flight attendants to attend the training. Also, flight attendants have been unwilling to attend classes that may require them to pay for hotel and meal expenses. The result has been low participation in the voluntary CMSDT. If flight attendants were paid or even if the costs associated with attending training were covered, then participation could be higher.

Another issue with the advanced voluntary self-defense training is that it is a one-time training that does not include a yearly recurrent training. To fully learn the concepts of the course, a recurrent training program should be made available for flight attendants to reinforce and practice what was taught. AFA-CWA firmly believes that many of the provisions of this voluntary self defense program should be integral parts of an air carrier's basic, mandatory training program.

One flight attendants when asked to compare the CMSDT to the basic security training being provided by her carrier stated, "I have taken the TSA self-defense class more than 10 times and feel the repetition has greatly enhanced my ability to defend myself. The few minutes in recurrent training does not help flight attendants understand the self defense moves".

Once Congress ensures that mandatory counterterrorism training, deemed effective by a qualified subject matter expert, such as the lead defensive tactics coordinator for the FAMs or the unit chief of the operational skills unit at the FBI academy at Quantico, is finally provided to flight attendants, CMSDT can indeed provide advanced training. If CMSDT is to remain voluntary, then any crew member who volunteers to enhance their ability to defend national security aboard a U.S. air carrier and attends the training should be compensated for their related expenses and training time, no less than to the extent that FFDOs are compensated or may be so compensated in the future.

It is time for Congress to put an end to the delay tactics and stop carriers from watering down the training to meet the needs of customer service instead of security training. It is time to protect flight attendants and close this dangerous loophole. AFA-CWA recommends adopting an aviation counterterrorism strategy based upon; hands-on and situational self-defense training for crew members, enhanced communication abilities, carry-on bag limitations and a permanent ban on in-flight cellular telephone use and those on-board Wi-Fi systems used by passengers are kept off during periods of high risk as defined by the Department of Homeland Security. Ten years after the 9-11 attacks and

almost three years after the Christmas day bombing attempt there is still work to be done in all four of these areas.

Today, reinforced cockpit doors are required on commercial aircraft, restricting access to the flight crew by the cabin crew. Simulated hijacking exercise has shown the potential for disabling of standard cabin interphone systems by terrorists, it is critical that new technologies and procedures be developed to allow immediate notification to the pilot during a suspected threat in the cabin.

AFA-CWA supports 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. To meet this specific need, airlines have merely created unique methods of communications including special knocks to communicate in the event of an emergency.

It appears that Congress' intent was for a device that is discreet, or as small and innocuous as possible, will allow all crew members to carry on their person 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 crew members 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 crew members under both general emergency (e.g., medical crises, emergency evacuations) and security threat conditions to use their hands to protect themselves, the cockpit, other crew members, passengers, and the aircraft while continuing to coordinate and communicate with the cockpit, the ground, and the rest of the crew. Obviously, a device possessing such characteristics must be wireless.

According to the Common Strategy security guidance, flight attendants are to observe passengers during the boarding process to watch for anything suspicious. Prior to takeoff, flight attendants can ask the captain to subject a suspicious passenger to additional security scrutiny. The ability of flight attendants to provide this critical final layer of pre-flight security is being severely hampered by the distraction created by carry-on baggage chaos. Flight attendants are consumed with trying to wedge excessive numbers of oversized carry-on bags into overhead bins and trying to get passengers to take excess bags back to the Jetway to be stowed as checked baggage.

To improve security during the boarding process, TSA and the FAA need to issue regulations setting a carry-on limit of one bag and one smaller personal item per passenger. This would create a uniform, enforceable rule and enhance security screening actions. The rule should limit passengers to one carry-on item plus one smaller personal item

A consistent rule would help to curb baggage-related distractions and disruptions in the cabin, reduce delays in boarding and deplaning, physical and verbal abuse of flight attendants and passengers, and injuries and impediments to speedy evacuations.

To ensure compliance, TSA could install templates with an opening to allow screening of carry-on bags that meet the proposed standard size limit. The FAA has resisted requests to set specific limits on the size and number of carry-on bags, instead providing guidance to carriers on how to establish their own programs. According to the FAA, this gives the carriers flexibility to create programs that fit their individual operations. However experience -- especially over the last year-- shows that this policy degrades security and safety.

Reducing distractions caused by carry-on bags would allow flight attendants to devote more attention to the more important task of watching for suspicious behavior during the boarding process. A new federal policy with positive and strict enforcement of standard carry-on bag limits will greatly improve aviation security.

The use of communications technologies by passengers (excepting designated law enforcement officers) on commercial airplanes raises a serious security risk: the potential to facilitate terrorist activities. Of particular concern are systems that provide wireless or wired access to passenger-owned devices for access to the Internet, cellular telephone networks, or onboard in-flight entertainment systems. The potential for terrorists to use such systems to communicate and coordinate tactics, both within the airplane and to team members on the ground and even on other airplanes is a grave concern to aviation security experts.

Passenger electronic devices pose additional potential threats to airplane software and hardware systems. These threats include, for example, laptop computers that could be used to plant viruses through the wireless network, or music/video players plugged into hard-wired ports that could be used to send electrical pulses into airplane electronic systems, with the potential to disrupt operations.

TSA requires that airlines conduct security sweeps of each aircraft at least once each day and, in addition, before an airplane leaves the United States and before an airplane returns from its last point of foreign departure to the US. Personnel conducting these sweeps are required to be trained well enough to search for and discover any hidden items that could be used in an attempt to destroy the airplane, passengers and crew, as well as persons and property on the ground.

A thorough security sweep takes time, so the vast majority of carriers use ground personnel to conduct these inspections. A few smaller airlines require flight attendants to conduct these inspections. AFA-CWA members have reported that the training on security sweep procedures is not adequate. More importantly, the additional security requirement to inspect all of the galleys, lavatories, overhead compartments, seatback pockets and underneath the seat cushions for hidden, potentially dangerous items does

not allow flight attendants sufficient time to complete their required FAA preflight duties which include checking the emergency equipment. They are also required to be in position for ground personnel to start boarding of passengers 20 to 30 minutes ahead of scheduled departure. Furthermore, the few airlines that require the flight attendants to conduct these security sweeps are airlines that often utilize a single flight attendant on their flights.

Airline flight schedule computers minimize time for the aircraft to be on the ground since only flying aircraft yield revenue. The gate agents pressure the flight attendants to close the door before they should to achieve an on-time departure. Flight attendants have reported that they have been disciplined by the airline if the door is not closed for an on-time departure even if the delay is a result of the security sweep procedures required by TSA.

Because of the realities of aviation operations, TSA should be required by Congress to have airline ground personnel dedicated to conducting thorough and complete aircraft inspections, as is done in a responsible manner by most air carriers prior to the vast majority of flights for which a preflight security inspection or “sweep” is required.

As my testimony highlights, flight attendants have not been provided the tools, training or access to the work place that their professionalism mandates. Carriers provide minimal and whimsical instruction on how to defend themselves and the flightdeck. Flight attendants who choose to participate in the voluntary training program are required to relinquish their days off and pay for expenses out of pocket.

A subject matter expert looking at the existing statute would ensure that the mandatory basic security training would train uniformed flight attendants, exposed to potential threats in the cabin, on each of the statutory elements of training to give them a reasonable chance of survival, working as a team with the rest of the trained crew and any identified able bodied passengers, to defend themselves and the aircraft. As the training is provided now, flight attendants are sometimes told that the airline provides security training because they are told to do so by TSA, but that they will likely experience nothing beyond verbal or minor pushing events. Such an attitude of denial in conducting so-called security training is worse than no training at all.

Despite the best intentions, the ideas put forward by Congress have been weakened and even ignored over time. Comprehensive Counterterrorism Training must be enacted by Congress in order to ensure implementation of what it has required since 9/11, but neither the FAA nor the TSA has required. That “Each air carrier providing scheduled passenger air transportation shall carry out a training program for flight and cabin crew members to prepare the crew members for potential threat conditions.” 49 USC 44918(a). As the uniformed crew member tasked by the TSA to defend the flight deck at all costs (Common Strategy II, 2005), the flight attendant is a target for terrorists to eliminate in order to successfully carry out an attack. Basic counterterrorism training for flight attendants, the elements of which are stated in the current law, if properly required and implemented by TSA, would prepare the flight attendants for potential threat conditions.