



A bold voice for transportation workers

COMBATING ASSAULTS ON AIRLINE CUSTOMER SERVICE REPRESENTATIVES

On January 8, 2014 a United Airlines customer service representative was summoned to assist a passenger in the Ft. Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport. According to news reports, the passenger then unleashed an unprovoked and violent assault on the employee: punching her in the head, dragging her to the ground by her hair and repeatedly kicking her stomach and legs as she tried to shield herself from the attack. The passenger was arrested and charged with battery, and the incident was widely covered by the media.

Unfortunately, this incident was just an example of a troubling rise in violent assaults on customer service representatives, including gate and ticket agents, at U.S. airports. But this incident was unique in that the perpetrator was actually arrested and charged with a crime. In the vast majority of incidents violent passengers face no legal consequences and are often able to continue on with their trip. This is unacceptable. Our government, airports and airlines must commit to protect front-line customer service representatives from physical and verbal assault on the job. We also need protocols in place to ensure that when incidents occur appropriate legal action is taken against the offender.

Keeping these employees safe requires a multifaceted approach that begins with a simple change to federal law. There is already a law making it illegal to interfere with a flight crew member or flight attendant's ability to perform his or her job. This same statute also creates stricter sentencing guidelines for cases involving assaults on flight crew members or flight attendants. This law should be expanded to include airline customer service representatives working in an airport. By taking this action, Congress would ensure that appropriate consequences face anyone who intimidates or assaults a gate or ticket agent on the job. Fortunately, on February 11th of this year during a markup of the Aviation Innovation, Reform and Reauthorization (AIRR) Act the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee unanimously adopted an amendment introduced by Rep. John Garamendi (D-CA) which made this important change to federal law. This provision should be included in any FAA Reauthorization that is ultimately passed and sent to the President for signature.

Beyond strengthening federal law, customer service representative must have the full backing and support of their employers when an assault occurs. There must be clear procedures for supervisors to rapidly alert airport law enforcement to an assault, as well as to prevent a violent passenger from moving through security or boarding an aircraft until law enforcement assesses the scene and takes appropriate action. Should a customer service representative file an incident report, his or her employer should give this report full consideration and provide the resources needed to help pursue legal action. Finally, should an incident result in arrest or prosecution, the employer must provide the victim with the leave necessary to pursue the criminal charges without any detrimental effect on his or her employment status.

Modern air travel can produce a stressful environment for both passengers and employees. Delays and cancellations can create havoc and severely disrupt an individual's travel schedule. But no passenger inconvenience, no matter how severe, can justify a violent assault on an airline employee who is doing his or her job. The federal government, the airlines and the nation's airports routinely emphasize their unyielding commitment to safety. That commitment will not be met if airline customer service representatives and all airline employees are not protected from the rising occurrence of assaults. Transportation labor calls on Congress and the President to enact common-sense legislation.

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