



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
May 17, 2017

Contact: Paul Hudson, 800-662-1859, paul@flyersrights.org

Flyers Rights Releases Testimony from Passengers Involved in Recent Airline Incidents

Washington DC, May 16, 2017--Tomorrow, the House Transportation & Infrastructure Committee will be holding a hearing titled *"The Need to Reform FAA and Air Traffic Control to Build a 21st Century Aviation System for America,"* discussing the proposal to privatize the nation's air traffic control system. Notably absent from this discussion are any passenger representatives. These passengers, who would be impacted by the proposed changes and have invested into the existing system through taxes and fees, deserve to have input into these decisions. By their exclusion, the Committee will not have the benefit of the views of the public who pay for and are directly impacted by the operation of air traffic control. Furthermore, the lack of any witness from the FAA ATC operations or the branch that claims that NextGen will be fully operational by 2020 is another gaping omission.

Passenger concerns are particularly important given the recent series of incidents where the big airlines have treated their paying customers abominably. (See flyersrights.org/videos) In one incident, Dr. Dao, a ticket-holding passenger that had been seated on the aircraft, was forcibly removed from the plane, causing the loss of two teeth, a broken nose, and a severe concussion.

Airlines have also shown incompetence in operation of their computer systems with numerous outages affecting thousands of flights and millions of passengers. (See DOT-OST-2016-0197-0001 pg. 3).

The very idea that the Congress would seriously consider disrupting long standing, competent operation of air traffic control by FAA by turning it over to a new entity controlled by the airlines, with taxing power, is incomprehensible to most passengers who, according to most surveys, have a high opinion of FAA Air Traffic Control and a low opinion of airlines.

FlyersRights.org is the largest nonprofit airline passenger organization. It operates a hotline for passengers at 877-FLYERS6, publishes a weekly newsletter, serves on the FAA Aviation Rulemaking Advisory Committee and maintains an office in Washington DC for public education and advocacy. See www.flyersrights.org. Its President, Paul Hudson, has been a national advocate for passenger rights interests for over 25 years.

Below is testimony from Jason Powell, a high school teacher and one of the passengers aboard Dr. Dao's flight who witnessed the altercation along with several of his students. In another incident, Nicole Harper, an ER nurse, mother and wife suffering from overactive bladder disorder was barred by the flight crew from using the restroom, forcing her to urinate in a cup at her seat and treating her as if she had committed a crime. Her testimony is also below.

####

Introduction Letter & Written Testimony
Jason Powell
Social Studies Teacher, Louisville Male High School;
Passenger, 4/9/17 United Airlines Flight #3411;
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
United States House of Representatives
May 17, 2015

Dear Representatives:

I was on United Airlines Flight 3411 with seven of my high school students. As a History teacher, a father, and a citizen, I was embarrassed and appalled at what transpired on board flight 3411. We must do better.

In my US History classes, we discuss the good and the bad parts of our history. As a teacher, I try to tie current events to our shared past. Sadly, parallels and connections to the “Gilded Age” abound. After the incident on Flight 3411, I was asked if I would ever fly United Airlines again. My answer was “probably.” Obviously, I will make every effort to avoid United, but the reality is, at some point, I will have no other practical option.

This idea of giving already consolidated airlines control of routes and even air traffic control will lead to more restraint of competition/trade and more monopolies on certain routes, especially in small markets like Louisville. There will be less competition and the development of fewer new carriers. Essentially, consumers will be stuck with limited options and higher prices while the airlines profit. I do not begrudge the airlines profits, but my concern is for consumers like myself. We are already forced to suffer the "\$200 change fee" along with baggage and many other assorted fees.

Looking back at our shared history and the current attitude of the airlines towards consumers, why would the government extend more powers to the airlines industry? It flies in the face of history. Please continue to exercise control over airlines and their routes.

Thank you,

Jason Powell

Formal Written Testimony of Jason Powell

Thank you for the opportunity to provide my perspective as this Committee undertakes its important FAA oversight and policymaking work to ensure that our aviation system works for all Americans. I am here today as a teacher, coach, parent and concerned citizen.

On Sunday, April 9th, 2017 I was returning along with seven of my high school students and several parents from a Spring Break trip overseas. Unfortunately, the last segment of our trip was on United Flight #3411 from Chicago to Louisville and the unconscionable events we witnessed that day will remain with us forever. I want to first express my sincere condolences to Dr. David Dao for the despicable, violent acts perpetrated upon him by United. No human being should ever be treated this way, let alone a paying customer of a multi-billion-dollar airline who wanted nothing more than to get home safely.

As a teacher who was traveling with my students, I was ashamed of the rude, unprofessional, condescending and ultimately violent conduct that we witnessed on that flight and that we consistently teach our children and students to avoid. It was the worst possible model for my students, and it was truly traumatizing to many of us who watched these events from such proximity. While the sense of helplessness was palpable, I was also encouraged by my fellow passengers’ protests and admonishments at the outrageous conduct

they were witnessing and the bravery of some to capture the events on cell phone cameras so that the truth could emerge.

While it may be easy for some to dismiss this incident as some type of outlier or the problem of one specific airline, for myself and millions of others it's more emblematic of a long term and troubling trend for an airline industry that increasingly seems far more concerned with its own profits than following the Golden Rule.

It feels lately like there are fewer airline customer choices, smaller seats, more restrictions, more airline caused delays and many more fees. It just feels hopeless at times, as though we are just endlessly at the mercy of an ever increasing, powerful set of corporate behemoths with limited power to fight back and take a stand.

Well I've decided to fight back. This resistance and effort by passengers around the country started several weeks ago with a recorded video and is continuing here in the halls of Congress. While I regret that because of my teaching duties I will not be able to join the esteemed members of this Committee today, I'm honored to be able to do my part to help stand up for fed up passengers around the country. I am also writing because I've learned that the airlines are now lobbying, and that Congress is considering, privatizing our air traffic control system, giving increased power and responsibility over critical air transportation functions to the big commercial airlines.

I'm certainly no expert when it comes to such matters, but suffice it to say, I was surprised when I learned about this development. It seems to me that if anything, Congress should consider increasingly robust policies that hold airlines more accountable to their customers, not providing a political handout to a powerful industry that so often seems to fall short of our basic expectations.

Thank you for your public service and for the opportunity to share my perspective.

**Written Testimony of
Ms. Nicole Harper
Registered Nurse, St. Luke's Health System, Kansas City, MO
United Airlines Flight 6056 Passenger
April 10th, 2017
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
United States House of Representatives
May 17, 2017**

Thank you for the opportunity to share my story as this committee considers legislative policy and oversight rules related to our air transportation system. These are very important issues which affect the lives and well-being of people just like me. I write to you today as a nurse, mother, wife and proud American citizen to express my concern about the business and customer service practices of the airlines and to ask you to enact policies that promote greater accountability from this financially and politically powerful industry. I regret that my nursing duties prevent me from attending the hearings in person today.

On April 10th, 2017 I was traveling with my husband and our two young children on a United Flight from Houston to Kansas City, the day after United personnel physically assaulted a paying passenger who refused to give up his seat. Unlike this poor gentleman, my experience did not result in serious physical injuries requiring hospitalization, however the emotional humiliation, stress and frustration will linger for a long time.

It was about 30 minutes into what was an uneventful flight when I first attempted to visit the lavatory, United Airlines flight attendant ordered me back to my seat. I complied. Some time passes, now other

passengers are moving about the cabin and beverage service is taking place. I explained to the flight attendants that the situation was urgent, as I suffer from an overactive bladder. I was told very rudely I was not allowed to get out of my seat. I told them I would either need to use the restroom or have a cup to pee in, I was handed two cups. Despite extreme embarrassment and violation of privacy, I was forced to urinate in the two cups in the presence of my children, husband and complete strangers.

At this point I am attempting to remain calm for the sake of my family but am both physically and emotionally upset. I remember my hands shaking and feeling extremely anxious. The treatment I received next was worse. The same flight attendant who moments earlier told me I couldn't get up now ordered me out of my seat and escorted me to the lavatory. Instead of acting with kindness and compassion to someone with a medical condition, she treated me as if I had committed a crime. She stated that they would be "filing a report", calling in a hazmat team to clean the entire row (which were completely clean) and that I'd be forced to speak to the pilot when the plane landed. I was not allowed to place the empty cups in the trash, rather forced to carry them off the plane. She talked to me like a mother scolding a child. I was shocked when at later stages of the flight, several other passengers were permitted to move about the cabin when the seatbelt sign was on. Of most significance was a gentleman from first class who walked right past the same flight attendant during the final descent on the way to the lavatory. They made eye contact and she smiled as he passed.

Once we landed and got settled, I understandably submitted a complaint. After several weeks of no response, I called to speak with customer service, seeking at the very least, an apology and explanation. After calling several times they informed me they never received my original complaint. The online reporting system that they solely rely on failed, as technology frequently does. I asked if I could speak with someone to someone in customer care and was repeatedly told this was not possible, that they were not accepting my call at this time. Words cannot describe how extremely frustrating it was to deal with them after the fact. I felt my complaint was not taken seriously. It is unbelievable and unacceptable that a company of that size does not have a customer service department that takes phone calls.

Once my story became public, United responded by lying about what happened, falsely claiming that the flight was in final descent, that they had reached out to me to better understand the situation, and they reported they did not know what I planned to do with the cups. Their statement was completely erroneous! Rather than take accountability for what happened and learn from the situation, they attacked my character and integrity. I felt victimized all over again because this time my very credibility was being called into question.

This is simply not a way to treat anyone, especially paying customers with medical conditions. As an emergency room nurse, I am well-aware of on the job stresses and regrettable incidents. However, I can tell you that whether in my job or any other professional service or retail setting, such poor treatment of customers would carry serious consequences for the staff member and employer. Why should we expect any less when we take to the sky?! If airlines don't take customer complaints seriously and hold their employees accountable for their actions, employees will continue to feel they can treat passengers however they want with no consequences.

The potential answer that's becoming increasingly clear to me from this incident and similar ones that seem to be in the news almost daily; is that the big airlines seem to think they are immune from widely accepted customer service and corporate behavior norms. I suspect that its related to the fact that there are now just a handful of airlines that dominate the market and they appear to prioritize the almighty dollar over doing right by their customers. Whether its cramming passengers into smaller spaces, losing luggage, endless fees, computer crashes, violently removing and injuring passengers to make room for their own staff or forcing people to urinate in cups, airlines seriously need to reexamine the way they do business. Since I've

told my story so many friends, family members, acquaintances and even strangers have come forward with their own stories of mistreatment. It's time for passengers and our elected officials to come together to declare that enough is enough!

I was also frustrated to learn that as part of the upcoming legislative process, the big airlines and their lobbyists continue to resist proposals supported by passenger rights groups that would provide more stringent regulations and stronger accountability. I was even more shocked find out that notwithstanding all the fiascos of the past several years, these same airlines are currently pushing Congress to let them manage the air traffic control system instead of the FAA – and that they may succeed. I realize I'm just a nurse from Kansas City, but it seems common sense this would be a dangerous and irresponsible decision given the industry's questionable track record and apparent inability to acknowledge and manage its own shortcomings.

Thank you for taking the time to hear my story. Please take my views into account when undertaking your important responsibilities to our country.