

SARA NELSON

Oral Testimony, as prepared
Subcommittee on Security Hearing
October 17, 2019

Chairman Wicker, Chairman Sullivan, Ranking Member Cantwell, Ranking Member Markey and Members of the Committee:

My name is Sara Nelson, International President of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, AFL-CIO (AFA), representing 50,000 Flight Attendants at 20 airlines. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today as a stakeholder in airport security.

Before continuing, I'd like to pause to recognize with profound sadness the passing of the Honorable Elijah Cummings. His was a voice of great moral clarity. We will miss the wisdom and strength with which he fought for working people, his beloved Marylanders, and our Nation.

On September 11, 2001, I was based in Boston as a United Airlines flight attendant. Before 9/11, I had worked United flight 175 frequently. It could have been me on that fateful day, but instead it was people I knew and worked with, including my good friends Amy King, Michael Tarrou, Amy Jarret, Kathryn Laborie, Robert Fangman, Al Marchand, Alicia Titus, Marianne MacFarlane, and Jesus Sanchez. Security is very personal for me and my flying partners. It is also fundamental to our ability to do our jobs.

I remember airport security prior to September 11th. I remember the faces of the screeners who allowed terrorists entrance to terminal C at Logan and the ability to board flight 175. I remember the screener's faces because they were there all the time, 7 days a week, all hours of the day. I remember the sounds of their voices, their tired smiles, and their efforts to work the long hours for the lowest bidding security company just so they could provide for their own families. I lost my friends, my profession was redefined and our world changed forever, but I also often wonder how those security agents have coped with their part in failing to stop the most fatal attack on US soil. Do they understand they were set up to fail?

On a fairly regular basis there has been an attempt to return to the old system where security checkpoints were contracted out to the lowest bidder. Any system that puts security second to profits borders on reckless and is an unjustified regression from TSA's successful mission 'to

protect the nation's transportation systems to ensure freedom of movement for people and commerce.'

We strongly support maintaining a professional, federal Transportation Security Administration workforce.

Federalizing airport screening has been a success, improving the security of air travel and providing a rigorous review of our aviation security with oversight by legislators and input from aviation stakeholders and the traveling public. Crew and passengers are safer today because of it.

We commend the efforts of TSA Administrator David Pekoske and the entire agency for extraordinary efforts during the 35-day government shutdown. Transportation security officers who were required to report for work faced stress over unpaid bills and uncertainty about when their paychecks would resume. This is an enormous distraction for the people charged with handling security on the frontlines. The shutdown stretched people and resources. It put our security at risk. It should never be repeated and resources allocated to airport security should never be diverted.

We urge lawmakers to ensure funding is adequate and stable to maintain the successful mission of TSA.

Safety and security doesn't just happen; it happens because we all work together to make it happen. Every day, when flight attendants report for work at America's airports, before we step onto the plane and assume our role as aviation's first responders, we rely on well-trained Transportation Security Officers to ensure our safety and security and that of the flying public.

Yet, this is a workforce of 44,000 Americans who do not have the guarantees and benefits of the Fair Labor Standards Act or the "General Schedule" pay scale and they do not have representation rights accorded by Congress to most of the federal workforce under the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978. TSOs cannot appeal adverse personnel decisions even though TSA managers, cargo inspectors and TSA administrative personnel have those rights. These are rights I work to protect for flight attendants, and what we should expect for the transportation

security workforce. Congress should act to accord TSOs these rights and ensure safer skies by passing Senate Bill 944, the Strengthening American Transportation Security Act of 2019.

On Saturday afternoon, August 24, 2019, TSA announced changes to the KCM program without consulting unions representing airline crew members. This resulted in confusion and misunderstanding among crew members as well as TSA personnel as to what procedures were going to be implemented and when. It also raised concerns about purpose of the sudden change, causing distractions across aviation. In the future, any time TSA considers changes to KCM or the standard security program for airlines or airports, that affect crew members and flight security, the agency should interface with flight attendant and pilot unions to ensure the most successful implementation of programs and maintain confidence in our overall security.

I would like to again thank the Chairman, the Ranking Member and the Members of this Subcommittee for this opportunity to testify. We are proud of our work as aviation's first responders and the last line of defense in aviation security. We appreciate your attention and diligent efforts to ensure we have the proper tools to perform our work and keep U.S. aviation safe and secure.