

Resolution: Protecting Frontline Airline Members From Abusive Passengers and Violence In The Workplace

Resolution #78A-21-08

Protecting Frontline Airline Members From Abusive Passengers and Violence In The Workplace

The passenger service and reservations agents of CWA and the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA have been engaged in a decades-long fight for the protection of frontline airline workers, who keep our national air transportation system moving and keep passengers and coworkers safe.

For decades, agents in the airport and the flight crews in the air have been at risk from unruly, abusive and violent passengers. Amidst the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic these incidents have skyrocketed to an unprecedented level.

Since January, 2021 the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has documented:

- 4,625 unruly passenger reports
- 3,366 masked-related incident reports
- 849 investigations initiated.
- 177 Enforcement cases initiated.

These staggering figures do not include incidents of disruption and abuse by passengers at the gates, which are not tracked in any systematic way by the FAA or any other federal agency. However, reports by our members indicate that incidents at the gates are likewise happening throughout the country at an alarming rate. At this pace, 2021 will see more documented incidents of unruly passengers than over the entire history of commercial aviation.

There are many factors contributing to this escalation of violence by passengers. Flight delays and other disruptions for passengers are common and systemic understaffing has strained the transportation system. During the pandemic, passenger service and reservations agents and flight crews have also been tasked with the role of enforcing the federal mask mandate for air travel, which is necessary to stop the spread of COVID-19. However, false rhetoric from some leaders has made this a political issue, rather than a safety issue.

Alcohol continues to be a major driver of passenger noncompliance with safety rules and is an aggravating factor in many incidents with unruly, verbally and physically abusive travelers.

The wide-availability of "to-go" alcohol at the airport only escalates passenger behavior and makes violence and abuse more likely.

Over time, our members have advocated for and won important improvements and stronger federal protections on the job. In 2000, Congress created meaningful penalties for assaulting a flight attendant. And in 2001, Congress passed legislation making assault of a passenger service agent a violation of federal law. A January 5, 2017 letter to Congress from the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) on behalf of the DOJ and U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) clarified that assaulting a gate agent is a federal offense. The FAA Reauthorization Act of 2018 increased fines up to \$35,000 for interfering with crewmember instructions and expanded protections against passenger assaults through new requirements on carriers.

On January 13, 2021, the FAA initiated a 'zero-tolerance' policy for unruly and dangerous passenger behavior. This needs to be a permanent policy to ensure that current laws are enforced and that our airline workforce is protected. As incidents against our members have escalated through 2021, it is clear that more needs to be done. The U.S. Department of Justice needs to pursue prosecutions against passengers whose behavior violates federal law. Sending a clear message that the law will be enforced and will protect passengers, crew members, and gate agents from disruptive, verbally and physically abusive travelers.

CWA cannot allow these attacks that occur on an almost daily basis to continue to go unaddressed. The health and safety of airline workers, the traveling public and the entire aviation industry will depend on a strong and coordinated federal response to assaults against all employees in our aviation system.

Resolved: CWA calls on all union members to help restore civility to air travel by showing respect for the safety of airline workers and other passengers and avoiding confrontations.

Resolved: CWA supports requiring that all airports, airport bars, restaurants, and shops post signage and issue verbal warnings to patrons about mask requirements and consequences for failing to comply.

Resolved: CWA supports requiring that airport bars, restaurants, and shops post signage and issue verbal warnings to patrons about alcohol requirements and consequences for failing to comply. We call on airports to comply with state/city laws to stop the practice of to-go alcohol.

Resolved: CWA calls on the Department of Justice to utilize existing statutes to conduct criminal prosecutions against travelers who verbally and physically intimidate, harass, attack or otherwise interfere with frontline airline workers and to provide clear guidance to airport police departments and other local law enforcement agencies who are tasked with documenting incidents on the ground and in the air, and refer them for federal prosecution.

Resolved: CWA calls on the heads of the Federal Aviation Administration, the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Transportation, the Department of Justice and the White House to deploy an interagency strategy to more effectively communicate with the public on this issue and develop procedures so that those that cause harm to airline workers and break the law are held responsible.
