

**United States House of Representatives  
Transportation and Infrastructure  
Aviation Subcommittee Hearing  
Wednesday, February 13, 2019**

**The Honorable Rick Larsen (D-WA) Chairing  
Putting U.S. Aviation at Risk: The Impact of the Shutdown**



**Testimony of  
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Thank you Chairman DeFazio, Chairman Larsen, Ranking Member Sam Graves, and Ranking Member Garret Graves for the opportunity to testify on the impact of the longest government shutdown in our history. My name is Sara Nelson, International President of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, AFL-CIO (AFA), representing nearly 50,000 of aviation's first responders at 20 airlines.

Last week I attended my annual safety and security training required for my qualifications as a certified Flight Attendant. Rule number one when performing safety-sensitive work: remove all distractions and focus. Shutdowns are never good. Our current experience is unprecedented. Almost two million workers were locked out or forced to work without pay for more than a month. Others have been going to work when our workspace is increasingly unsafe. The entire airline industry is in jeopardy. No one will get out of this unscathed because aviation is what connects and moves our entire economy. Lawmakers and people in government know that. Yet somehow, we are here discussing the 35-day nightmare for federal workers and those of us who count on them to keep us safe.

Picture this. Airline pilots typically maintain what they call a "sterile cockpit" during takeoff and landing, when no communication is permitted between the cabin and flightdeck. This is to allow pilots to focus on the most difficult, and task-intensive, parts of the flight. But during the recent government shutdown – the longest in our nation's history – some pilots briefed flight attendants that there would be no sterile cockpit on their flight. They were so concerned that the shutdown had compromised security screening, that they felt the need to alter safety procedures so that they could be informed immediately if there was a security issue in the cabin.

This is just one of the many chilling stories I heard in recent weeks from flight attendants and the pilots we fly with. The shutdown put our lives and livelihoods in danger, risked the safety of everyone who flies, and threatened our entire economy.

Many Americans breathed a sigh of relief when the shutdown ended, assuming that the crisis had passed. But things will only get worse if the shutdown continues into day 36 on February 16.

Flight attendants are not federal workers, and people have asked why we are so outspoken on this shutdown. It's simple: aviation doesn't work without federal workers. Air travel is a fully-integrated operation that relies on government and private industry working together. When any link in this chain breaks down, the whole system suffers. We still feel the shock and horror of losing our flying partners because of gaps in security. We never shake that grief, nor the pain we experienced with furloughs and bankruptcies that erased retirement security, required us to work harder for less, and spurred many stories of personal loss.

We need air traffic controllers to be fully rested and able to focus on their jobs, not worried about losing their homes. We need transportation security officers tuned in to their morning briefing, not wondering if the food pantry will still be stocked when he gets off his shift. We need the intelligence community on the job to identify threats and stop them, not worrying about the means to care for their own kids. We need the Coast Guard flying out over our waters with full view of what's ahead, not just over our borders to serve as the last line of defense.

Safety and security is non-negotiable. It is critical that Washington stop the threat of a day 36 and take steps to ensure this never happens again. AFA fully supports the proposed Aviation Funding Stability Act of 2019 which would allow the FAA to keep all of its programs running and all of its employees working by drawing from the Airports and Airways Trust Fund during any

lapse in typical government appropriations. This legislation makes sense because there's absolutely no argument to close government when funding exists specifically related to the functions of the FAA. Still, we've all seen that aviation relies on many areas of government to keeping flying safe: DHS, DOT, CBP, State, Justice, FEMA, FDA, EPA. We call on all lawmakers to ensure government workers are never locked out again.

If the shutdown continues, we won't know when or where problems may happen. That's why my union, along with other aviation unions, warned that the risk to aviation posed by the shutdown could not even be measured. Because of the disruption of key federal systems that support the operation of the airline industry, air travel could be disrupted at any time, anywhere – and that's not even counting the damage if there's a serious incident.

Flight attendants are aviation's first responders and the last line of defense for aviation safety and security. We take our responsibility seriously. That's why, through our unions, we've fought to ban smoking on planes, to keep knives out of the cabin, and so much more. Now, we are once again standing up for safety and security.

We also worked with this committee to achieve long-term authorization for aviation to improve further upon, outside of this current environment, the safest transportation system in the world. The FAA Reauthorization Act of 2018 included critical issues that matter for the safety of flight attendants, pilot, and passengers. Flight attendant fatigue exists today. The bill includes improves rest along with implementation of a Fatigue Risk Management Plan to close this safety loophole. Evacuation standards for certification of aircraft do not take into consideration the current cabin environment for safe evacuation. Secondary cockpit barriers are required to be installed on all new aircraft to help thwart an attempt to breach the flight deck and end the absurd policy of expecting flight attendants to serve as that physical barrier. The bill addresses these issues too, along with sexual assault prevention, reporting and response – among hundreds of other safety initiatives. None of these things have been implemented though and the shutdown made it impossible to move forward with accountability.

Flight attendants started to experience the economic impact of the shutdown, as did our communities. Airlines had scheduled flight to a new commercial destination, Paine Field (PAE), as of February 4, 2019. Horizon flight attendants had schedules reflecting this flying in February, but this work is now cancelled. Flight Attendants who had PAE flying were given the options to sit reserve or take time off *without* pay. Monthly guarantees were reduced. The company stated in a memo to AFA that there would be a negative financial impact on affected Flight Attendants when there isn't any open time to replace the removed flying. While AFA is disputing the lack of pay protection, the immediate impact is felt by these flight attendants.

In addition to the lost wages and per diem to the Horizon Flight Attendants, the economic impact to Everett includes cancellation of over 600 crew overnight hotel rooms. The total lost revenue to the Everett community is unknown as other travelers also aren't staying in these hotels, eating at nearby restaurants, using transportation, or otherwise spending in the community.

At other airlines halted approval aircraft caused cancelled flights and less work for flight attendants. This was the tip of the iceberg. If air traffic controllers who are eligible to retire decide that is the only option they have to provide for their families, a significant portion of airline capacity will be grounded. This will result in massive layoffs for flight attendants and directly harm the 11 million Americans who do work related to our industry. It will hamper our ability to compete with the world and it may create damage that lasts years. The consequences for all of our communities is enormous.

## CLOSING

There are serious issues we need to debate as a country, but our democracy and economy only work when the basic functions of our government are in place. It is immoral to put American lives in danger with reckless political games. We cannot allow our airline industry to be decimated by continue the shutdown for day 36 and beyond.

There is bipartisan support to keep the government open with stable, long-term funding. Americans overwhelmingly support this solution.

As I close, I must leave you with this: if Congress ignores the will of the American people and takes us to Day 36 of the shutdown, flight attendants will not risk the lives of our colleagues and our passengers.

We have a duty to protect ourselves and the American people from danger. Working people have power when we come together. If Congress chooses the chaos of a continued lockout, we will use that power. If Congress will not put an end to this crisis, we will take action to save lives and protect U.S. aviation.

I would be happy to answer any questions.