

Testimony of Capt. Claudia Zapata-Cardone, Latino Pilot Association

Aviation Subcommittee Hearing

“Bridging the Gap: Improving Diversity and Inclusion in the U.S. Aviation Workforce”

U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

July 20, 2021

On behalf of the Latino Pilots Association (LPA), I want to thank you, Chairman Larsen, Ranking Member Graves, and members of the subcommittee for inviting me to appear before you today. My name is Claudia Zapata-Cardone and I am a proud Latina pilot, daughter of Colombian immigrants, and a union member. I am also an Airbus A320 captain flying for United Airlines. As someone who had a dream, I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss with you today the importance of breaking down barriers and creating opportunities for all those who dream of flying. Because that's what we need to do if we want to guarantee a continued strong, robust, and highly trained pilot workforce while also maintaining the safest air transportation system in the world.

When I was growing up, my father worked at the airport and we would bring him dinner almost every night. I remember thinking how magical it must be to fly an airplane. My parents faced a lot of hardships along the way, often working two jobs in order to support our family, but they were determined to chase their American dream.

Looking at those airplanes every night, I didn't think that being a pilot was an option because I had never seen a pilot who looked like me. But the older I got, the more determined I was. And because of the work ethic instilled in me by my parents, I rolled up my sleeves and began the process that ultimately led me here today.

I feel like I've achieved something beyond what my parents could have ever imagined, which is why I am committed to creating a more diverse and inclusive aviation workforce, while also ensuring that the United States continues to remain the global leader in aviation safety. Currently, I serve as executive director for Community Relations with the LPA. And, I am a proud, dues-paying member of the Air Line Pilots Association, the world's largest pilot union. Together, our outreach efforts are connecting with Latinx students from around the country to educate and demonstrate the amazing benefits of being an airline pilot.

It is important that more people who look and sound like me are able to access this profession. It's important that we tap into the currently underrepresented pool of potential airline pilots to ensure a healthy and robust pilot pipeline in the future. LPA and ALPA are one hundred percent committed to changing what the pilot community looks like while maintaining current safety standards.

According to 2020 data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics¹, the racial makeup of our country's pilots is 92% white and 91% male. Last year's figures show less than 3% of U.S. commercial pilots are African Americans, fewer than 7% are Hispanic or Latinx, and a little more than 4% are Asian. Together, we can change this.

¹ <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.htm>

There are several steps policy makers can take to ensure we have an adequate supply of pilots, that we break down barriers, and we help foster a more diverse and inclusive aviation workforce that reflects the communities and customers our industry serves. Chairman Larsen, thank you for your leadership in sponsoring the bipartisan Promoting Service in Transportation Act to help spread the gospel about careers in transportation to create a more diverse workforce. And this subcommittee's inclusion of the Women In Aviation provision as part of the FAA reauthorization in 2018 is producing meaningful benefits to expand opportunities for women in our field.

Other ways Congress can help this collective mission is to align federal funding support for the education required to become an airline pilot with that of other highly skilled professions.

- Authorizing and increasing federal educational aid programs such as the Pell Grant Program would help provide financial assistance to students following two- and four-year degree programs at post-secondary higher education institutions in order to cover the costs of aviation flight training.
- Additionally, we should expand opportunities for those who fought for our country to use their GI Bill to help cover the cost of two- and four- year flight training degree programs.
- Congress could also consider student loan cancellation programs that would allow airline pilots to work for a specific period in exchange for loan forgiveness.
- And we should review government guidelines to increase the number and amounts of subsidized loans available to students for flight training and ensure students who receive unsubsidized loans do not accrue interest on the loans while in school.

Currently, there are severe economic disincentives for pilots considering employment at regional airlines, which serve as a main avenue for individuals to enter the profession. It's important that we improve this career entry point while maintaining the first officer qualification requirements that have helped make U.S. air transportation the safest mode of transportation in the world.

I believe we can—and must—do more as a nation to open the doors of opportunity for those currently underrepresented in the piloting profession.

Thank you for your continued oversight on this very important topic.