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Able-bodied Passengers Extend Crew Capabilities During In-flight Emergencies

Flight attendants typically have been trained in using able-bodied passengers in emergency evacuations of aircraft. Passengers also have helped in subduing disruptive passengers and terrorists.

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FSF Editorial Staff

Flight attendants typically identify able-bodied passengers (ABPs) early in a flight to be able to request their assistance during some in-flight emergencies — especially emergency evacuations. The tasks that can be assigned to ABPs (also called able-bodied persons, able-bodied assistants or passenger assistants) vary according to a number of factors, including the type of emergency and the extent to which flight attendants may need assistance to perform their duties.

The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) defines able-bodied passengers as “passengers selected by crewmembers to assist in managing emergency situations if and as required.”¹

The Global Aviation Information Network (GAIN), an international, cooperative program of data sharing and analysis, says that the best choices of passengers to function as ABPs typically are off-duty crewmembers from any air carrier, military personnel, police officers, fire fighters, emergency medical personnel, physicians and nurses.² Nevertheless, during situations in which cabin crewmembers have little time or no time to plan their response to an emergency, the passengers closest to a cabin crewmember may be those chosen as ABPs.

Civil aviation authorities and airlines have similar guidelines for selecting ABPs.

In Australia, “the operators usually see the wisdom in training their cabin crew to [identify] the most likely passengers to be ABPs,” said Susan Rice, a cabin safety inspector for the Civil Aviation Safety Authority of Australia (CASA).³



In the United States, flight attendants for virtually all air carriers and some other operators have procedures in place for the use of ABPs, said Nancy Claussen, a U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) cabin safety inspector in Phoenix, Arizona, U.S.⁴

“In an emergency, you’re going to solicit able-bodied passengers,” Claussen said. “It widens the scope way beyond those sitting in exit seats.”

“If you have time, ABPs are usually identified according to a hierarchy. First come people who work for your airline, then people from other air carriers [passengers traveling on non-revenue status are usually indicated on the passenger manifest], people with background and training as first-responders, and military personnel.”

Medical personnel also are among those who often are requested to function as ABPs.

In some situations, conversations with passengers during the flight have enabled crewmembers to determine which passengers would be most helpful. At other times, cabin crews of some airlines use announcements over the passenger address (PA) system to request passengers to volunteer as ABPs, said Luis Claudio Ciepiewski, a flight attendant and member of the Flight Safety Department at TAM Brazilian Airlines.⁵

In some emergencies, there is not sufficient time to determine a passenger’s background, said Nanette TerBush, American Airlines manager of regulatory compliance, flight service operations. Under those circumstances, “you generally just look at the person and decide if they could help,” she said.⁶

ICAO says, in its *Training Manual: Cabin Attendants' Safety Training*, that cabin crewmembers' training should emphasize the "importance of selection and briefing of [ABPs] assigned to care for special-needs passengers, to hold passengers back until exits can be assessed and opened, to first go down the slide (with a cabin attendant) and to stay at the bottom of the slide and assist other passengers, as well as to hold the slide steady in case it is buffeted by the wind."⁷

Rice said that typically, the tasks assigned to ABPs include operating an exit, being reseated next to a passenger who is likely to require help evacuating the airplane, helping passengers use an evacuation slide or an over-wing exit, and directing passengers away from the airplane after they have reached the bottom of the slide or have exited through a door.

TerBush said that in addition to those tasks, her airline often assigns ABPs (known at American as passenger assistants) as "buddies" to help other passengers who have difficulty walking or to accompany minors traveling alone.

If a flight crew has ditched an airplane, cabin crewmembers also assign ABPs to assist in preparing rafts for deployment.

In any emergency, if an ABP fails to perform the task requested by the cabin crewmember, the crewmember "says 'thank you' and grabs somebody else," Claussen said.

"There are no guarantees," she said. "You can never be 100 percent sure how anybody is going to react in an emergency until it happens."

For example, some passengers may try to take control of the situation; others may, for a variety of reasons, become reluctant to perform tasks requested by cabin crewmembers.

"If they even begin to hesitate, we replace them," said Tim Patterson, manager of in-flight training for America West Airlines.⁸

Training for America West's cabin crewmembers includes a discussion of the first question that crewmembers are expected to ask of a potential ABP (referred to by the airline as an able-bodied assistant). If the question — "Are you willing to assist me?" — is answered negatively, cabin crewmembers are to replace them immediately, the training material says.⁹

After ABPs are chosen, they often are relocated so that they will be better able to perform their designated tasks. The reseating process should not result in separation of families, however, because if an evacuation were required, parents probably would be more concerned with locating their children than with evacuating the airplane.

Whenever possible, cabin crewmembers give ABPs detailed briefings about the tasks they are being asked to perform, show them the exit door where they will be assigned and use the safety information card as they explain how the exit operates.

For example, America West's briefing technique requires that cabin crewmembers "establish and maintain eye contact; remain calm; speak clearly and act confidently; use hand signals (to point out exits, exit operations, etc.); announce all instructions; shout above cabin noise as necessary; and give specific information, while avoiding the use of airline terminology."

These actions are important to ensure that the ABPs are attentive, to "instill more confidence in the passengers and avoid panic" and to limit misunderstandings, the recommendations say.

Information used during America West's recurrent training describes a number of scenarios, including scenarios in which a cabin crewmember is uninjured, able to perform his or her duties and requires assistance from ABPs in holding back other passengers while crewmembers assess conditions and determine how to proceed with the evacuation. In these situations, ABPs typically are asked to help passengers off the evacuation slides or to gather passengers into a group a safe distance from the airplane.

Other scenarios include those in which a cabin crewmember is injured and unable to perform his or her duties. In these situations, ABPs typically must move the cabin crewmember, assess conditions outside the airplane and take command of the evacuation.

In some emergencies, cabin crewmembers do not have time to prepare ABPs for their role. In those situations, the approach might be to "grab the closest person and say, 'you — when you get to the bottom [of the evacuation slide], hold the slide,'" Claussen said.

In emergencies that arise with minimal warning for cabin crewmembers to conduct ABP briefings, passengers often assist — without being asked — in any way they can, she said.

Many aircraft accident reports include discussions of how passengers have helped in evacuations, either following a cabin crewmember's directions or acting on their own.

For example, a survival factors report¹⁰ accompanying the U.S. National Transportation Safety Board report on a June 1, 1999, accident in which an American Airlines McDonnell Douglas MD-82 overran the runway while landing at Little Rock (Arkansas, U.S.) National Airport includes numerous descriptions of passengers who helped other people leave the airplane.¹¹

In the survival factors report, one passenger described how, as he crawled down the aisle in the first-class section of the airplane after the impact, he heard a woman asking for help.

"She was under a luggage bin," the report said. "He picked it up and she was lying on the floor, faced down. She could not get up, so he moved the bin. He grabbed her arm, and they crawled out of the airplane together through a big hole in first class."

Another man “went back into the cabin three or four times, looking for passengers” who needed help, and a woman helped a seatmate who had “a bad ankle,” the report said.

Passengers often have intervened — typically without being designated as ABPs — to help crewmembers subdue disruptive passengers. In one such incident, during a March 27, 2000, Germania charter flight from Berlin, Germany, to the Canary Islands, a man entered the flight deck of the Boeing 707 and attacked the captain. Several passengers responded to the first officer’s request for help, subdued the man and removed him from the flight deck.¹² In a similar incident on Aug. 5, 1999, a man tried to enter the flight deck of a Singapore Airlines Boeing 747 en route from Los Angeles, California, U.S., to Tokyo, Japan. He was restrained by passengers and flight attendants. Later, the man tried to open an emergency exit; again, he was restrained by passengers and flight attendants.^{13,14}

Patterson said that passenger offers of assistance have become more frequent since the Sept. 11, 2001, hijackings in the United States of four airplanes that were flown into buildings in New York, New York, and near Washington, D.C., and into the ground near Johnstown, Pennsylvania. All four airplanes were destroyed; 265 people in the airplanes were killed.

Gary Thompson, general manager—health and safety, in-flight services at Delta Air Lines, said that, regardless of the situation, cabin crewmembers look for the same types of passengers to serve as ABPs.¹⁵

“For most of my career . . . we instructed our flight attendants to look for military [personnel] or law enforcement officers and, in the case of a medical emergency, to request the assistance of medical professionals,” Thompson said. “A few years ago, when disruptive passengers became more of a problem, our focus expanded to include who might be able to help us in a disruptive-passenger situation. Basically, the same criteria for selection were used, so it made it easy to tell our flight attendants to expand the scenarios that might require help. After 9/11 [the Sept. 11, 2001, hijackings], the importance of using all available resources on the airplane became paramount.”

Typically, flight attendants do not expect to receive ABP assistance from air marshals, who are assigned for security purposes to some flights in some countries and are responsible for preventing a terrorist takeover of an airplane.

“The air marshals’ jobs hinge on their being anonymous,” Claussen said. “One line of thought is that a problem involving, for example, someone who appeared to be an intoxicated passenger might actually be a situation staged as a distraction by terrorists trying to take over an aircraft.”

After the 2001 hijackings, ICAO prepared guidance material that said that, during an attempted hijacking, ABPs could be asked to help the cabin crew by blocking access to the flight deck and restraining an aggressor. During such situations, the

cabin crew should maintain control over the ABPs providing assistance, the guidance material said.¹⁶

Two months after the 2001 hijackings, passengers on an American Airlines Boeing 767 were credited with assisting cabin crewmembers to subdue a man who tried to detonate bombs in his shoes during a flight from Paris, France, to Miami, Florida, U.S. Passengers and crewmembers overpowered the man, tied him to his seat and sedated him while the flight crew deviated to Boston, Massachusetts, U.S., where the man was arrested.¹⁷

Also in the aftermath of the 2001 hijackings, at least one company was created to train passengers about how to respond during emergencies.

“It’s important that passengers be aware of how to assist the crew,” said Don Detrich, founder and CEO of Flight Watch America, which provides “defensive flying” training on what to expect in the event of an emergency evacuation or an aircraft decompression, as well as incidents involving disruptive passengers or hijackers.¹⁸

“We’re trying to make people more capable travelers,” Detrich said. “But the flight attendants should be the leaders in these situations because they’ve had more training.”

About 700 people have taken the course, Detrich said.

Although they have become involved in recent years in subduing disruptive passengers, ABPs more often have been asked to help cabin crewmembers in emergency evacuations of aircraft and related emergencies.

“In every investigation of an accident, you find there were passengers helping in some way, shape or form,” TerBush said. “Most people want to help.”♦

Notes

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