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FAA, Pilots and Flight Attendants Propose Measures to Reduce Passenger Interference with Cabin Crews

A U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) advisory circular and a recent conference discuss how to avoid or counteract passenger misbehavior. Remedies might include additional cabin crew training, information that makes it clear to passengers that interference with a crew member is a serious offense, and completion of in-flight disturbance reports to aid law enforcement.

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FSF Editorial Staff

Pilots and flight attendants have become increasingly concerned with airline passengers who have interfered with crew members performing their duties. Incidents have ranged from mild harassment to assault, from simple nuisances to potentially life-threatening situations. They are occurring on airlines based throughout the world. And they are on the rise. American Airlines reported 140 assaults on flight attendants in 1995, up from 33 the year before. United Airlines reported that the number of verbal and physical assaults increased from 77 to 94 during the same period.¹ There were 20 assaults on Qantas Airways staff last year, compared with eight in 1995.² Police at Los Angeles (California, U.S.) International Airport say that they are called about once a week to take an intoxicated traveler off a plane.³ With annual passenger enplanements expected to increase from a current 600 million to more than 900 million in the year 2010, abusive in-flight behavior is likely to increase.

Meg Leith, air safety and health coordinator for the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA), said that most troublesome intoxicated passengers are men, and that the flights most likely to produce alcohol-related disturbances are those carrying



groups to vacation destinations. She said, “In a bar, when a person is asked to leave, they can do so. In an airplane, there’s a big catch. They can’t leave. So we can get stuck with some pretty loud and obnoxious and angry passengers. ...

“Occasionally, problems arise with European travelers, who may be accustomed to free liquor offered on many Europe-based carriers.”⁴

On a Northwest Airlines flight from London, England, to Minneapolis, Minnesota, U.S., a violent food fight erupted among 18 British and Irish tourists. When the plane landed in Minneapolis, one of the passengers was arrested for assaulting a flight attendant. The remaining 17 were immediately deported to England by U.S. immigration authorities. All are barred from re-entering the United States.⁵

In May 1996, the Independent Federation of Flight Attendants (IFFA) made several comments and recommendations to the FAA deputy administrator on the subject of abusive

passengers.⁶ They included requests from the Coalition of Flight Attendants Unions (CFAU) for assistance in creating a public-awareness advertising campaign, designing crew training for dealing with abusive passengers, obtaining assurances that no reprisals will be taken against employees who report or experience workplace violence and forging collective carrier agreements to limit alcohol consumption aboard aircraft.

Also included in the letter was a list of proposed flight attendant procedures for responding to passenger disturbances (Table 1).

U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) regulations deal with violence in the workplace. They require management to: (1) commit to worker and client safety; (2) create a policy of zero tolerance for workplace violence that encourages employees to promptly report incidents and assures them that no reprisals will be taken against those who report or experience workplace violence; (3) advise employees of company policy for filing of charges and calling police when assaulted and assist them in doing so; and (4) provide employee training and education on personal safety, assault avoidance, assault response and management of violent behavior.⁶

FAA Advisory Circular (AC) 120-65, *Interference with Crewmembers in the Performance of their Duties*, addresses the responsibilities of air carriers, actions that should be taken to minimize passenger disturbances, reporting of incidents, definitions of in-flight infractions and appropriate responses, and sample policy and procedure statements.⁷

Rules Specify Undesirable Behavior

U.S. federal regulations are clear on the behavior of airline passengers. No person may assault, intimidate or interfere with a crew member's performance of duties aboard an aircraft. It is not necessary to show that the flight attendant was in fear of his or her individual safety; nor is it necessary to show that the aircraft was endangered. The penalty is a fine, imprisonment for not more than 20 years or both.⁸

Passengers who appear to be intoxicated may not be boarded; or, if boarded, may not be served alcohol. Passengers must obey seat-belt and no-smoking signs.⁹

On a British Airways flight from São Paulo, Brazil, to London, a Uruguayan businessman strolled around the cabin while smoking. When confronted, he

Table 1

Proposed Flight Attendant Procedures for Responding to Passenger Disturbances

The following are excerpts from recommendations made by the Independent Federation of Flight Attendants (IFFA) to the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) in May 1996.

1. When a passenger becomes disruptive, attempt to defuse the situation and ensure that the captain, first officer, purser or number 1 flight attendant is aware of the problem; present the passenger with an in-flight disturbance report that will inform the passenger of the regulations involved and that prosecution is possible if the behavior continues.
2. If the passenger becomes violent, make every attempt to remove yourself from the immediate area.
3. If a passenger becomes uncontrollable, notify the captain immediately. Supply the captain with as much information as possible about the incident, including the passenger's name, seat number and traveling companion. State whether medical attention is needed. Inform the captain if you wish authorities to meet the inbound flight.
4. In the case of a violent passenger, enlist other passengers to help restrain the individual.
5. Summarize the events and describe the offender for law enforcement officials and the company. Verify the name and address of the disruptive passenger and of any witnesses. Be prepared to make a statement to officials on landing if charges are to be filed against the passenger.
6. Follow up with the company and the Association of Professional Flight Attendants (APFA). The company, APFA and Allied Pilots Association (APA) are committed to help you if you are a victim of an assault or passenger misconduct. Notify your service manager for assistance, which can include legal counseling.

Source: Independent Federation of Flight Attendants

assaulted three passengers and a flight attendant. He was jailed for 30 days and barred from future flights on British Airways.⁵

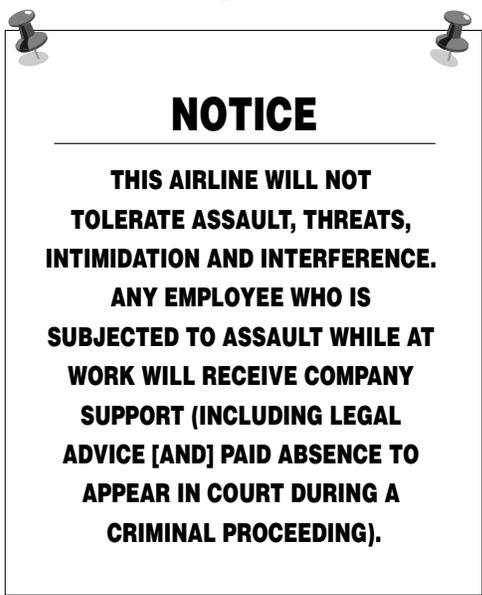
The AC provides two sample messages for use by air carriers. Figure 1 shows a statement of airline policy: the airline will not tolerate abusive passenger behavior and will stand behind employees who are subjected to interference, physical violence or intimidation while on the job. Figure 2 shows a sample caution message for passengers. This text could be printed in in-flight magazines or on ticket wallets to remind passengers that interference with flight crews is a crime punishable under federal law.

Cabin Crews Must Recognize Potentially Abusive Situations

Crew members should be trained to deal with abusive passengers, the AC said.

Tony Blauer, president of Tactical Confrontation Management Systems, speaking at an Air Line Pilots Association, International (ALPA)-sponsored seminar on abusive passengers,¹⁰ said that, to be effective, training must replicate the scenario the flight attendant expects to encounter. The flight attendant must be prepared in advance, like the night club entertainer who is always ready to respond to a heckler. To this end, Blauer suggested that, in addition to more conventional training methods, role playing is an excellent way to teach flight attendants how to defuse threatening passenger behavior.

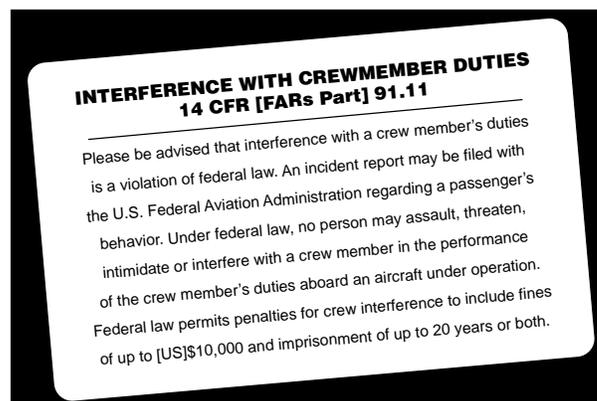
Sample Support Message For Flight Crews



Source: U.S. Federal Aviation Administration

Figure 1

Sample Caution Message For Passengers



CFR = U.S. Code of Federal Regulations
FARs = U.S. Federal Aviation Regulations

Source: U.S. Federal Aviation Administration

Figure 2

Cathay Pacific Airways has produced *Guidelines for Handling Unruly Passengers*, a handbook for flight crews. Cathay Pacific has also produced a training video on the subject, in which airline personnel act the roles of flight attendants and unruly passengers.

“Regardless of how the training is provided,” the AC said, “it should include information which will help the crew members recognize those situations which may, when combined with traits of some passengers, create stress.”⁶

*A federal judge in Savannah, Georgia, U.S., sentenced a man to 51 months in jail for assaulting a USAir flight attendant on a flight from Savannah to Charleston, South Carolina, U.S., in the summer of 1996.*¹¹

A panel of four industry members, headed by Walter Coleman, president of the Regional Airlines Association (RAA) and member, Flight Safety Foundation (FSF) board of governors, addressed the topic: “Airlines’ Disruptive-Passenger Programs.”¹⁰ The panel recognized that the problem of abusive airline passengers is global, and that solutions have been impeded in part by the lack of information; and that airlines may have been reluctant to make official reports of abusive passenger behavior for fear of becoming identified as a carrier of abusive people. The panel agreed that the banning of abusive passengers would be an effective remedy, but that it would be difficult to implement. They further concluded that diverting a pilot’s attention to a problem in the cabin is dangerous; especially with a two-person flight crew, which is reduced by 50 percent when one pilot leaves the flight deck.

Cindy Hoene, a member of the Air Transport Association (ATA) cabin operations committee and chairperson of its subcommittee on passenger disruption, presented an airline's perspective on the problem of abusive passengers.¹⁰

She discussed the results of one major airline's passenger experience during 1996. Researchers who analyzed the information concluded that the incidents of unruly passenger behavior were attributable to eight root causes¹⁰ (Table 2).

According to the table, apparent intoxication was considered to be responsible for only 25 percent of incidents. Nevertheless, intoxication could have also played a role in the abusive behavior (12 percent) that the researchers could not attribute to any of the other listed causes.

"Passenger disruption due to intoxication includes incidents of apparent intoxication prior to flight, apparent intoxication during flight and alcohol consumption from personal supply," Hoene said. "Prevention begins with preflight observation in the gate area. Severely intoxicated passengers are often easily identified by their behavior and appearance. These passengers are to be denied boarding. However, the appearance of intoxication is subjective, and gate personnel often must make a judgment call."

Monitoring the service of alcohol on board the aircraft can be equally challenging. Passengers sometimes consume from their own bottles; the flight attendant may not be aware that the passenger is intoxicated until his behavior has become extreme.

To circumvent attempts by the cabin crew to stop their alcohol service, passengers have been known to order drinks from several different flight attendants.

*On a nonsmoking American Airlines flight from Stockholm, Sweden, to Chicago, Illinois, U.S., two passengers refused to extinguish their cigarettes. The passengers became verbally abusive towards the crew members, and flex-handcuffs were used to restrain the passengers. The captain elected to divert to Montreal, Canada, where, upon landing, the passengers were taken into custody by the Royal Canadian Police. After remaining in jail there overnight, the two passengers were deported back to Sweden the next day.*¹⁰

"Ticket counter and gate agents and flight crews should have guidelines to aid in evaluating and determining the appearance of intoxication," Hoene said. "In addition, there should be specific procedures to follow when an apparently intoxicated passenger is denied boarding or is denied alcohol after exhibiting intoxicated behavior during flight."

Non-alcohol-related Causes of Abusive Behavior

Problems with seat assignments are usually the result of duplicate assignments, splitting up of families, upgrades or unsatisfactory seat location. "Seat-assignment resolution is most efficient and successful if identified and handled before passenger boarding," Hoene said. After the boarding process begins, flight attendants may be too busy to resolve seat-assignment issues effectively. "Typically, passengers are upset about [resolving] a seat assignment problem after boarding."

Smoking is a relatively recent cause of passenger problems, arriving with the advent of long "no-smoking" flights. Sometimes the problem is cultural; the passenger simply does not understand the language in which the smoking prohibition is expressed. In other instances, the smoker cannot tolerate nicotine withdrawal. Hoene said, "For passengers who anticipate difficulties coping with the nonsmoking environment, a nicotine substitute may be helpful."

Some airlines are taking steps to resolve this problem. On most flights, Air France maintains a small designated smoking area between the economy- and business-class sections. Japan Airlines has recently introduced a "smoker's nook" at the back of each of its long-haul Boeing 747s.²

In an International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) letter, Sept. 20, 1996, Phillipe Rochat, secretary general, suggested that the "no smoking" prohibition be widely enunciated by the airline for the flight concerned: in print on the ticket cover and boarding pass, in multilingual preboarding

Table 2
One Airline's Experience with Causes of Abusive Passenger Behavior

Cause	Percent of Total Incidents
Apparent Intoxication	25
Seat Assignment	16
Undetermined	12
Smoking Where Prohibited	10
Carry-on Luggage Disputes	9
Employee Behavior/Attitude	8
Food Service	5
Other (a variety of causes, each of which accounted for less than 1% of total)	15

Source: Cindy Hoene, Northwest Airlines

announcements, and on the aircraft PA system immediately after boarding. He also suggested, agreeing with Hoene, that nicotine chewing gum be made available to passenger-smokers, as aspirin is available for passengers who have headaches.¹²

A passenger on a Southwest Airlines flight preparing to leave Los Angeles was overheard to say, "It's not going to make it. We're all going to die." Two pilots for another airline, who were traveling as passengers on the Southwest flight, reported the remarks to the Southwest captain. As a precaution, the captain disembarked the passengers in an area remote from the terminal. The man who uttered the threatening statements was arrested.¹³

Disputes involving carry-on luggage generally flow from refusal to stow luggage in approved locations, refusal to check oversize or excess luggage, and anger that the overhead bins are already full. As with seat assignments, luggage disputes are best resolved by gate personnel before passengers have boarded the aircraft.

Some passengers feel, rightly or wrongly, that they have been mistreated by an airline employee. "Several air carriers have initiated programs focused on enhancing employee understanding of passenger expectations and frustrations," Hoene said. "Employee behaviors that typically evoke a negative passenger response are identified. Employees are taught alternate behaviors that have proven useful in calming a disruptive situation."

Problems with food and beverage service arise from insufficient choices or quantities of food or beverages or unavailability of an ordered special meal. The overall problem is relatively minor and considered difficult to assess. "More detailed analysis may prove useful," Hoene said, "in determining the major issues regarding passenger meal dissatisfaction."

Other Passengers Can Help

The AC said that flight crew training should also teach crew members to seek help from other crew members or passengers in restraining the abusive individual, and to provide the flight crew with as much information as possible during and after an incident.

On a United Airlines flight from Tokyo, Japan, to Honolulu, Hawaii, U.S., a male passenger grabbed the buttocks of a female passenger and later urinated on the seats. When another female passenger told him to stop, he hit her in the face. He was taken into custody by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). He faces up to 20 years in prison and a US\$10,000 fine if convicted of interfering with the cabin crew.¹⁴

“What turns a sober-suited business man into a drunken animal? Dr. Richard Dawood, Condé Nast Traveler’s medical advisor, explains that the effects of alcohol are much more pronounced in an airplane than on the ground. [First-class and business-class] air travelers are typically offered a drink at the start of the flight, when they are most likely to have an empty stomach. Also, being [served] free cocktails on a long flight can make it difficult to keep track of intake. Alcohol consumption increases dehydration, exacerbating jet lag

“Cary Cooper, professor of organizational psychology at England’s University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology, says the stresses of air travel make it easier for people to lose control. ‘It is an unreal atmosphere: no police, no signs of inhibition,’ he says. He adds that the customer-ising culture of airline service inhibits crew members and encourages passengers to misbehave.”¹⁵

Dr. Jerrold Post, professor of psychiatry at George Washington University, Washington, D.C., said that there are insufficient data to draw strong conclusions about potentially abusive people and situations that encourage abuse. But anecdotal evidence suggests to him that there are three psychological traits that can spawn abusive behavior, particularly when by intensified by an anxiety about flying and the drinking of alcohol.¹⁰

The first of these traits is the passenger’s extreme belief in “entitlement”: someone who feels unequivocally entitled to whatever he or she wants. The second is the person who is accustomed to a great deal of authority — a powerful executive, for example — who cannot tolerate being told what to do by someone who is seen as having subordinate status. The third is fear of flying, sometimes a characteristic of the person who dreads loss of control, and who anxiously senses that while airborne his or her destiny is in someone else’s hands.

Post said that the environmental reasons for the increases in abusive in-flight behavior include greater delays and more crowded passenger cabins, both of which can cause anxiety; smoking deprivation, in some situations; and long periods in the air. Abusive passenger incidents, he said, are five times more likely on transatlantic flights than on domestic flights.

Cabin crew members should understand that it is not desirable to have flight crew members leave their stations, the AC said. Nevertheless, the training should also recognize the authority

of the captain, and that the decision to leave the cockpit is his or her responsibility.

The most serious form of passenger abuse is the assault of a crew member. Assault is defined generally in the AC as “an action taken toward an individual that creates a threat of bodily harm, or the apprehension of physical injury. In some jurisdictions, abusive or suggestive language, unless used in a manner that creates the threat of violence or harm, is not considered an assault.”⁷ Crew members who are assaulted may, like any other citizen, bring criminal or civil charges. Criminal charges can result in fines or incarceration; civil action is taken to recover money damages.

On a United Airlines flight from Frankfurt, Germany, to Dulles International Airport, Washington, D.C., U.S., a German tourist complained that the flight attendant had bumped him with the food cart. The flight attendant apologized, but the passenger nevertheless threw the flight attendant against the

emergency exit and hit him on the head and face. Three other passengers pulled the attacker off the flight attendant. The abusive passenger was prosecuted in federal court and sentenced to six months probation. The flight attendant’s balance and hearing were affected by the attacks. He is in physical therapy and has not worked since the incident.¹⁵

Although it may be difficult to obtain during the confusion of dealing with an unruly passenger, the assaulted crew member should obtain as much personal information as possible about the attacker and any witnesses. If it is not feasible to get the attacker’s name and address, such information as a physical description and seat number could help in later identifying the passenger. It is also important that the employee report an assault immediately to the company.

The AC provides a typical in-flight warning form that can be adapted by the air carrier (Figure 3). The form is completed by the captain and the lead flight attendant, signed by the

Sample Airline Passenger In-flight Disturbance Report

Notice: Your behavior may be in violation of federal law.

You should immediately cease if you wish to avoid prosecution and your removal from this aircraft at the next point of arrival.

This is a formal warning that federal law prohibits the following (reference Title 14 of the Code of Federal Regulations [U.S. Federal Aviation Regulations (FARS)] Parts 91 and 121):

- Threatening, intimidating, or interfering with a crewmember (section 91.11);
- Smoking on a nonsmoking flight or in the lavatory (section 121.317); and/or
- Drinking any alcoholic beverages not served by a crew member or creating an alcohol-related disturbance (section 121.575).

An incident report will be filed with the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration. If you do not refrain from these activities you will be prosecuted. The U.S. Federal Aviation Act provides for civil monetary fines and, in some cases, imprisonment.

Date: _____ Flight #: _____
Departure City: _____ Arrival City: _____
Passenger Name: _____ Seat #: _____
Address: _____
Description of Incident: _____

Witness Name: _____ Seat #: _____
Address: _____

Phone #: _____
Flight Attendant Name: _____
Employee #: _____ Base: _____
Flight Attendant Signature: _____
Captain Name: _____
Employee #: _____ Base: _____
Captain Signature: _____

Source: U.S. Federal Aviation Administration

Figure 3

Table 3
Passenger Misconduct and Suggested Crew and Air Carrier Responses

Category One	Category Two	Category Three
<p>Actions which do not interfere with cabin or flight safety, such as minor verbal abuse.</p> <p>Response</p> <p>Cabin crew member requests the passenger to stop inappropriate behavior.</p> <p>Passenger complies with request. There is no further action required by the cabin crew member. (Such an incident need not be reported to the cockpit, the air carrier or the FAA.)</p>	<p>Passenger continues inappropriate behavior that interferes with cabin safety, such as verbal abuse or refusal to comply with federal regulations (e.g., failure to fasten seatbelt when sign is illuminated or operation of unauthorized electronic equipment).</p> <p>Response</p> <p>The cabin crew member should follow the air carrier's procedures regarding cockpit crew notification. After attempting to defuse the situation, the aircraft's captain and the cabin crew member will coordinate the issuance of the "Airline Passenger In-flight Disturbance Report" or other appropriate actions. Completed report is given to appropriate air carrier personnel upon arrival, and they may file the incident report with the FAA.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Crew member duties are disrupted by continuing interference. 2. A passenger or crew member is injured or subjected to a credible threat of injury. 3. An unscheduled landing is made and/or restraints such as handcuffs are used. 4. Operator has program for written notification and passenger continues disturbance after receiving written notification. <p>Response</p> <p>Advise the cockpit crew and identify the unruly passenger. Cockpit crew requests the appropriate law enforcement personnel to meet the flight upon its arrival.</p>

Source: U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)

captain and delivered immediately to the troublesome passenger. The form contains the passenger's name and address, a description of the incident, the names of any witnesses and a stern warning citing federal law and the possible penalties.

Table 3 shows the types of passenger misconduct and corresponding actions suggested by the AC to be taken by flight and cabin crews and the air carrier. The AC cautions, however, that each airline's legal department should ensure that the table accurately reflects the rights, duties and responsibilities of the airline and its personnel.

In November 1996, the FAA launched a pilot program to help ensure that violent passengers on aircraft are prosecuted. Under the program, FAA security officers in airports are charged with the responsibility of coordinating the efforts of air carriers, crew members, local law enforcement officers and assistant U.S. attorneys in bringing violently abusive passengers to justice. The program was tested initially at Honolulu International Airport and Los Angeles International Airport. As a result of its successful operation, the program is being expanded to include New York LaGuardia Airport, John F. Kennedy International Airport, New York, New York, U.S., and Newark (New Jersey, U.S.) International Airport.¹⁶

ALPA and CFAU officials have stated informally that they consider abusive passengers an important ongoing issue, and that their recent seminar on the subject is only the first.♦

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Correction: The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration Civil Aeromedical Institute (CAMI) has issued a correction to its report, *Inflight Medical Care: An Update*, which was adapted in the March-April issue of *Cabin Crew Safety*.

The correction includes Figure 5 in the CAMI report, which was also Figure 5 in the FSF article. The title should have included the words “Emergency Rate per Million [rather than 100,000] Enplanements.” The left-hand Y axis should have been labeled “Million Enplanements,” and the right-hand Y axis should have been labeled “Emergencies per Million Enplanements.” The error will be corrected in the next printing of the CAMI document.

The correction does not change the significance of the figure, which is that the in-flight medical emergency rate for domestic U.S. air carriers increased at a considerably greater rate than the number of enplanements during the 1990–1993 period.

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