

POLITICO

COCKPIT DOORS STILL UNSECURE, SAFETY ADVOCATES SAY

By Kathryn A. Wolfe - Politico 6/11/13

Safety advocates are ramping up the pressure on airlines to finish closing one of the security holes that played a role in the Sept. 11 attacks: breachable cockpit doors.

That may sound surprising, especially given how quickly the airlines — prodded by Congress — rushed after the tragedy to harden the doors to withstand intruders, small arms fire and even some grenades.

But reinforced cockpit doors work only when closed, and pilots sometimes open them in mid-flight for restroom breaks and meals. And some airlines — especially United — have backslided on earlier promises to install secondary barriers that would block access when the doors are opened, according to safety advocates who include airline pilots and a 9/11 widow.

Also joining the cause is Rep. Mike Fitzpatrick (R-Pa.), who has written legislation that would force airlines to install secondary barriers. Fitzpatrick said in a [letter](#) to United last year that “there have been many publicized, and lesser known, attempts by terrorists to storm cockpits since 9/11,” and added that “studies have shown that a cockpit [can] be breached in as little as 3 to 5 seconds without secondary barriers.”

The industry group Airlines for America says the decision on secondary barriers should be left to each airline. United officials offered assurances that they are keeping their cockpits secure, although they said that for security reasons they cannot offer details.

United’s flight security has “various components” such as secondary barriers “that we use in different combinations,” airline spokeswoman Christen David said. “This security matrix can vary from one type of aircraft to another.”

“Please be assured that we are absolutely compliant with all FAA regulations, which include a multitude of cockpit security measures,” wrote Michael Quiello, United’s vice president for corporate safety, in a November [letter](#) to Ellen Saracini, whose husband Victor was the captain on United Flight 175 when hijackers flew it into the World Trade Center’s South Tower.

Some of those security measures include the federal air marshal program and a program that pays to train and arm pilots. But a relatively small percentage of pilots pack heat, and only a fraction of planes have an air marshal on board — the exact figures are classified.

Saracini isn't satisfied, saying the vulnerability that allowed terrorists to seize the controls of her husband's airplane more than a decade ago still exists.

"It got quite upsetting to me," she said, particularly in light of what she said appears to be United's decision not to put the barriers on its new planes. United would not discuss specific security measures.

The secondary barriers — in some instances, made of wire mesh — are not meant to be impenetrable but to give pilots a few crucial seconds to close and lock the cockpit door if someone tries to storm it.

United and Northwest Airlines agreed to install secondary barriers after Sept. 11, in part to head off a mandate that some advocates were pushing for. But Northwest has now been merged into Delta, which had not made a commitment to install the secondary barriers. And following its merger with Continental, United appears to be backing away from its earlier promise.

Recently, United decided to uninstall the secondary cockpit barriers that had been delivered as standard equipment on its new 787 Dreamliners, according to Ellen Saracini and the union that represents United's pilots.

Saracini and United's pilots union are rallying behind Fitzpatrick's [bill](#), which has picked up 14 co-sponsors including former House Homeland Security Chairman Peter King (R-N.Y.). FAA rules require that cockpit doors be closed and locked during flight except for brief pilot breaks, such as to visit the bathroom. That's less extreme than the practice used by El Al, the Israeli airline known for its tight security, which requires that cockpit doors remain locked from before the first passenger boards until the last one leaves.

Fitzpatrick told POLITICO he became involved after getting to know Saracini, who brought the issue to him. He said he came away as dissatisfied as she was after United [responded](#) to his concerns.

Fitzpatrick said relying on programs such as armed pilots and air marshals is inadequate, particularly considering that the Obama administration has proposed budget cuts to both. "We are just asking that all of the provisions of that multi-faceted flight deck security system [ordered after Sept. 11] be put into place," he said.

The bill has been referred to the House Transportation Committee, and Fitzpatrick said he has discussed the bill with Chairman Bill Shuster (R-Pa.). "I've raised it with him and he knows that I'm committed," Fitzpatrick said.

But some security experts say that though the attention to secondary cockpit barriers is well-intentioned, it zeroes in on a vulnerability that no longer poses a high risk.

Kip Hawley, former head of the TSA, said storming the cockpit is low on the vulnerability list because of multiple layers of security that aren't necessarily obvious, beyond armed

pilots, air marshals, trained flight attendants and passengers who won't allow themselves to be hijacked again.

He said preventing another Sept. 11 isn't just a matter of keeping terrorists from staging the same kind of attack they carried out in 2001 —it means “never let them exploit a vulnerability that we have in the system to get a catastrophic loss.”

“There are real vulnerabilities, real threats that absolutely need to be stopped, and this is not one of them,” Hawley said. “This is a potential scenario that's fresh in the minds of many people. Not to disrespect it, but in the real world of protecting planes, it's low on the list of actually where our vulnerabilities are. We have that one very well covered.”

###