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Airlines reject call for secondary cockpit security gate

9/11 widow advocates for gate made of steel cables

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Are flight decks in commercial airplanes vulnerable to hijackers for the few seconds when a pilot opens the cockpit door during flight to stretch, get a meal or use the lavatory?

That's the question behind an effort to require airlines to install secondary cockpit barriers, a lightweight gate of steel cables that would be drawn in front of the cockpit door. The gates would create a secure vestibule area while the pilot locks the main cockpit door behind him, foiling potential terrorists with designs on rushing the cockpit in an attempt to wrest control of the plane, supporters say.

Nobody seems to dispute that modern cockpit doors are quite secure. But pilots exiting or entering the cockpit during flight, an action that lasts only about five seconds, creates risk of another 9/11-style attack, says Ellen Saracini, widow of Victor Saracini, a pilot of United Airlines Flight 175, which crashed into the south tower of the World Trade Center during the 2001 terrorist attacks.

Secondary barriers are a solution, she contends.

"If you know anything about terrorists, they look for weaknesses," she said. "This is something that nobody is taking the responsibility for — to do what's right for the safety and security of Americans. ... There is a simple solution to at least take that threat out of the way."

Saracini, of Yardley, Pa., traveled to Chicago this month to meet with a security executive at United Airlines about the issue. Bipartisan federal legislation to require the secondary barriers, dubbed The Saracini Aviation Safety Act of 2013, has been introduced in the House, co-sponsored by dozens of legislators including two from Illinois. A Senate version was introduced Sept. 11.

"Pilots want the barriers, airplane designers can install the barriers affordably and passengers deserve the peace of mind to know that reasonable precautions have been taken to ensure their safety," U.S. Rep. Mike Fitzpatrick, R-Pa., who sponsored the House bill, said in a statement.

But airlines don't see secondary barriers as a security priority.

Most aircraft never had them. And United Airlines, one of the few airlines that owns planes equipped with the gates, is having barriers removed from its new orders of Boeing 787 Dreamliners, according to Saracini and United's pilots union. While United has such barriers on several of its fleet types and is likely the largest U.S. user of them, Saracini was dismayed the airline her husband worked for no longer sees them as important.

In a Sept. 4 meeting in Chicago, Saracini said she was told by United Vice President Michael Quiello that the airline won't voluntarily install the barriers, because such cockpit breaches aren't the focus of current security measures, and that United does everything it is required to do for safety and security. She said she was told by United that the cost of the barriers, estimated to be at least \$5,000 each, was not a factor.

In a statement, United said it takes safety seriously and works with industry and government leaders to enhance cockpit security, but the secondary barriers are unnecessary.

"Security measures have evolved in the years since the secondary barriers were ordered, and many more layers of security now exist. While we don't discuss the details of the security measures that are used for a particular aircraft or a particular flight, we thoroughly carry out our security responsibilities for every flight."

Airline association Airlines For America also does not support a requirement. "We do not believe they should be mandated," said spokeswoman Jean Medina. "We believe individual carriers should decide whether to install them."

Saracini said installing the barriers is a small step airlines could take that could make a big difference. Today, some airlines use procedures to help reduce the cockpit-door risk, such as placing a beverage-serving cart and flight attendant in front of the door as a pilot exits. Advocates of the barriers say those efforts are insufficient.

"The procedures that they're doing are clearly not enough," Saracini said, pointing to two studies that found secondary barriers were cost-effective ways to reduce a security risk. "Nobody would say that secondary cockpit barriers are not a good idea," Saracini said. "It's just that until it's mandated, they're not going to do it."

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