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Widow of Sept. 11 Pilot Seeks More Cockpit Security

By: Ron Nixon, July 16, 2013

WASHINGTON — The widow of a United Airlines pilot who died on Sept. 11, 2001, is lobbying for legislation that would require airlines to install a second security door to prevent would-be hijackers from rushing cockpits. But the move is opposed by the airline industry, which says the existing security measures are good enough.

Ellen Saracini, whose husband, Victor, was the captain on the hijacked United Flight 175, which crashed into the World Trade Center's South Tower, said she learned in August that United had begun removing the secondary security doors from newer planes. She began lobbying Congress this year, making trips to Washington from her home in Yardley, Pa. "It's quite upsetting to me," Ms. Saracini said in an interview.

"When Victor and the others died, United did the right thing and added these doors. Now they are backsliding."

After the 2001 attacks, Congress required airlines to install reinforced cockpit doors that could withstand gunfire and explosives.

Some airlines, United in particular, went further by installing retractable, fence-like barriers between the cockpit and the outer security door. But pilots who work for United say the airline, which merged with Continental in 2010, is removing the doors to save money. The pilots say they believe that Continental, which runs the new company created in the merger, ordered the doors removed because its planes had no doors and it did not want to have to put doors in all the merged company's planes — about 1,000 in all. The secondary doors are believed to cost \$5,000 to \$12,000 each.

United declined to comment on the doors. It is unclear how many of them remain in the planes.

Ms. Saracini is supported by the Air Line Pilots Association and the Federal Law Enforcement Officers Association, which represents officers from various federal agencies, including the Transportation Security Administration and the Secret Service. A bipartisan coalition of 22 lawmakers, mostly from states where the hijacked planes crashed on Sept. 11, have taken up the cause. They have introduced a bill, the Saracini Aviation Safety Act, that would force airlines to install secondary barriers. The bill has been referred to the House Transportation Committee.

Representative Michael G. Fitzpatrick, Republican of Pennsylvania, the bill's main sponsor and Ms. Saracini's congressman, said he had made several attempts to get answers from United about the removal of the second doors and other security measures.

"They have given some vague answers about security measures they have, basically saying, 'Just trust us,' " Mr. Fitzpatrick said. "The bill that I'm sponsoring simply fulfills the intent of the efforts that were started over a decade ago by adding another layer of protection."

Pilots and law enforcement officials say the current security doors do protect cockpits from attacks — except when pilots open the doors for bathroom breaks or meals, which they say would give a well-trained group of terrorists a five-second opening to breach the cockpit. With two doors, pilots and law enforcement officials say, when a pilot leaves the cockpit, he can close one behind him before opening the door to the rest of the plane. Airline industry and law enforcement officials, who asked not to be quoted, said there have been at least 11 attempts worldwide by individuals to get into a cockpit since the Sept. 11 attacks. The officials said they could not say if any of the attempts had been in the United States.

The Federal Aviation Administration and the T.S.A., agencies with oversight of airline security, have acknowledged that the secondary security doors provide additional safety. An F.A.A. report in 2011 concluded that of all the security measures — including human barriers and galley carts placed before the doors — the secondary doors were the most "cost-effective, efficient and safest way to protect the cockpit." The agency declined to make the doors mandatory.

A spokeswoman for the F.A.A. said the agency would review any legislation on the secondary security doors but would not require them unless directed to do so. Most airlines contacted said they did not have the secondary barrier doors and had no plans to install them.

"Installing a secondary barrier door to the cockpit of our aircraft is not in the current plans for our fleet," said Michelle Agnew, a spokeswoman for Southwest Airlines.

Delta Air Lines did not respond to questions about the secondary security doors. In 2007, Northwest Airlines, which has since merged with Delta, installed secondary doors on some flights but decided against installing them on all the planes in its fleet.

Although United Airlines did not address specific questions about the removal of the doors, a spokeswoman said the airline took the safety and security of its customers and workers seriously.

"Security measures have evolved in the years since the secondary barriers were ordered, and many more layers of security now exist on each of our aircraft," said Christen David, the spokeswoman. "While we don't discuss the details of which security measures are used for a particular aircraft or a particular flight, we are thorough in carrying out our security responsibilities for every flight."

Airlines do not disclose their security measures, but F.A.A. documents and interviews with pilots show that the measures include positioning flight attendants in front of a door or in some cases placing a food cart in front of the cockpit door.

“I wouldn’t even call that security,” said Jon Adler, president of the law enforcement union. Ms. Saracini said the secondary doors were a small price to pay to prevent another terrorist attack.

“I’m not doing this for Victor. I can’t help him,” she said. “I’m doing this so no one else will have to suffer through what my two girls and I had to suffer through.”

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