

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 12, 2019

Daniel K. Elwell  
Acting Administrator  
Federal Aviation Administration  
800 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20591

Dear Acting Administrator Elwell,

We write to inquire about steps the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) is taking to investigate and address reports that airlines are pressuring their mechanics to ignore safety issues and short-cut the critical work they perform.

According to an eight-month investigation by CBS News, more than two dozen aircraft maintenance workers have come forward expressing concern that pressure from airlines to rapidly return aircraft to service may be endangering aviation safety.<sup>1</sup> Airlines naturally have an economic incentive to keep aircraft in service as long as possible; a plane only generates revenue if it is transporting passengers. But despite the need for safety to take precedence over airline profitability, mechanics have reported that managers have instructed them to “skip a few steps” in the maintenance process or to perform only the specific work assigned and ignore other safety defects they detect. Many of these safety-critical personnel fear retribution or even termination if they fail to comply with these dangerous directives or if they bring safety concerns to light. Since 2015, through whistleblower complaints, the FAA has documented several cases of inappropriate pressure and retaliation.

Congress has given the FAA the mandate to maintain the integrity and safety of our national airspace. As a part of that charter, the FAA certifies airlines’ maintenance policies, procedures, and programs, which detail how mechanics will ensure that aircraft are meeting airworthiness standards. A critical component of any effective maintenance plan is an adherence to maintenance protocols and a safety-centric environment that encourages mechanics to both identify and report safety concerns. When safety standards are violated, the FAA has the obligation to investigate allegations and require corrective action.

To better understand how the FAA is investigating and responding to these troubling reports, we respectfully request answers to the following questions by March 5, 2019:

1. Since January 1, 2017, how many complaints has the FAA received about airlines’ pressuring maintenance workers to ignore safety issues or short-cut safety-related work? For each complaint, please:

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<sup>1</sup> *Airline mechanics feel pressured to overlook potential safety problems: “Accident waiting to happen,”* CBS News (Feb. 4, 2019), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/airline-mechanics-feel-pressured-by-managers-to-overlook-potential-safety-problems-cbs-news-investigation/>.

- a. Summarize the complaints, detailing the date, location, nature of the accusation, the type of maintenance work being performed, and the aircraft parts and systems involved. If the complaint was made or memorialized in writing, please provide a copy.
  - b. State whether the FAA investigated the accusation, and if not, why not. Describe the FAA's findings, any corrective action the FAA required, and whether the airline complied.
2. In April 2018, we wrote to the FAA about reports of safety lapses at Allegiant Air. The FAA's response stated that "getting to the next level of safety requires finding and fixing hidden problems before they can cause an accident. Because everything starts with finding safety problems, compliance also requires the airline to have procedures that encourage open reporting." In light of this statement and the CBS News report, please:
- a. Explain how the FAA ensures that airlines are not putting unnecessary pressure on mechanics to expedite maintenance work or otherwise ignore safety concerns.
  - b. Explain how the FAA ensures that mechanics have the unfettered ability to report safety concerns without fear of reprisal, including termination, from the airlines. Does the FAA expressly prohibit airlines from engaging in retaliatory action against employees who openly report safety concerns, or otherwise forbid the implementation of other disincentives to such reporting? If no, why not? If yes, how?
3. Is the FAA investigating the disturbing reports uncovered by CBS News. If no, why not? If yes, please describe the nature and scope of the investigation.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. If you have any questions, please contact Daniel Greene of Senator Markey's staff at (202) 224-2742.

Sincerely,

 Edward J. Markey United States Senator	 Richard Blumenthal United States Senator
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