

United States Senate

Washington, DC 20510-1304

April 20, 2016

Nicholas E. Calio
President & CEO
Airlines for America
1275 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Suite 1300
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Mr. Calio:

I write to express my concern about a series of recent incidents involving alleged discrimination by airline employees against Muslim-American and Arab-American airline passengers.

According to press reports, a Muslim college student was removed from a Southwest flight earlier this month for speaking in Arabic on a phone call. While waiting for the plane to finish boarding, Khairuldeen Makhzoomi, an Iraqi refugee who has lived in the United States for six years, called his uncle to tell him about an event he had attended the night before with the Secretary General of the United Nations. Shortly after ending the call with a customary Arabic salutation, Mr. Makhzoomi was reportedly ordered to exit the plane by a Southwest employee. Mr. Makhzoomi then was interviewed by law enforcement and the FBI, who determined no further action was necessary. After receiving a refund from Southwest, Mr. Makhzoomi was compelled to fly another airline back to the University of California at Berkeley.

Unfortunately, Mr. Makhzoomi is not alone in his experience. For example, last month, a Muslim family from Illinois was forced to exit a United Airlines airplane after the mother, who wears a hijab, reportedly sought help from a flight attendant with her child's booster seat. And during a United Airlines flight last May, a flight attendant refused to give Tahera Ahmad, a Muslim chaplain at Northwestern University, an unopened can of soda after reportedly stating that Ms. Ahmad could use it as a weapon.

Airlines are entrusted with enormous responsibilities to keep our skies safe while respecting the rights of all passengers. No airline passenger should be subject to discriminatory treatment on the basis of the passenger's religion or ethnicity.

Ethnic and religious discrimination strikes at the core of our nation's commitment to equal protection for all. In 2011, I chaired the first-ever Congressional hearing on the civil rights of American Muslims, which documented an alarming increase in anti-Muslim bigotry. And U.S. Attorney General Loretta Lynch recently denounced the "disturbing rise in anti-Muslim

rhetoric.” In this environment, our nation’s airlines must pay special attention to their responsibility to ensure that the civil rights of all passengers are protected.

I would like to know what Airlines for America and its member airlines are doing to prevent incidents of discrimination from occurring. In particular, I would appreciate your response to the following questions:

1. Do all of your member airlines require diversity and nondiscrimination training for employees?
2. Do all of your member airlines have complaint procedures in place for passengers who feel that they have experienced discrimination? Do these procedures require airline employees to notify passengers that they can file a complaint with the U.S. Department of Transportation’s Aviation Consumer Protection Division?
3. What procedures do your member airlines have in place to ensure that allegations of discriminatory treatment are fully investigated and remediated?

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to your prompt response.

Sincerely,



Richard J. Durbin
U.S. Senator