

Call for Commerce and T&I to Stand Firm on Pilot Qualifications as Committees Approach Mark-Ups

Buffalo, New York - May 6th, 2015 - After strong statements from Miracle on the Hudson pilot, Captain Chesley 'Sully' Sullenberger, at Aviation Safety hearings in both the Senate and House last week, calling on committee leadership to continue to promote strong entry-level first officer requirements and to not cave in to airline industry pressure, the 'Families of Continental Flight 3407' singled out Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia for his questioning of both Sullenberger and Regional Airline Association President Faye Malarkey Black at last Tuesday's Senate hearing.

"We are absolutely thrilled with how Senator Manchin highlighted the importance of pilot experience at last week's hearing," stated John Kausner of Clarence Center, New York, who lost his twenty-four year old daughter Ellyce in the crash of Flight 3407 in February 2009. "Certainly he brings a valuable perspective to this discussion because he has been a pilot himself. But more importantly, Senator Manchin is one of the few members in Washington who does not look around the room to see where everyone else is standing before he decides where he is going to stand. He is a member who has a well-earned reputation for evaluating each and every issue on its own merits, so for him to weigh in on the side of Captain Sullenberger and experience is a big deal to us, and something that members in both houses and on both sides of the aisle should take strong notice of."

During Manchin's questioning, he responded to regional airlines' attempts to diminish the value of requiring additional flight hours for new-hire first officers by making the observation that, "If you survive 1500 hours, you had to make some decisions." In a back-and-forth with Sullenberger where Sullenberger characterized any pilot hiring difficulties for the regional airlines as 'self-inflicted' due to decades of poor working conditions which have discouraged many young, aspiring aviators from the profession, Manchin termed it 'unfathomable' that Colgan Air would put Flight 3407's first officer in a situation where she felt inadequately prepared for Northeast weather conditions. And he concluded his remarks by asking Malarkey Black, "Surely you can understand if there's a person who's been in the left seat for 20,000 hours [referring to Sullenberger] telling us one thing, and you're representing an organization, you would think that maybe we might lean a little bit towards the experience?"

"In over six years of attending congressional hearings, we have not seen a more compelling witness than Captain Sullenberger, and it was great to see Senator Manchin gravitate to his wealth of experience," stated Karen Eckert of Williamsville, New York, who lost her sister Beverly Eckert, a prominent 9/11 widow and activist. "Captain Sullenberger certainly laid out a strong case for why additional experience prior to entering the cockpit of a regional is absolutely critical from a vetting standpoint, highlighted by the fact that the captain of Flight 3407 was hired for his first regional job at only 600 hours. He also made a strong point that the best pilot preparation includes both structured and unstructured elements, as even the best pilot training programs feature a certain element of 'hand-holding' along with the need to shield their trainees from difficult operating conditions due to potential liability issues. Most importantly, Captain Sullenberger shone a bright light on the poor working conditions that regional airline pilots have struggled with over many years; this is the root cause that must be addressed over time in order for the regional airlines to be more successful in attracting young pilots. All in all, Captain Sullenberger has made it abundantly clear that it would be a major mistake for Congress to water down these critical safety requirements."