

'Pilot Shortage Cartel' Continues Efforts to Undermine Safety Regulations

Buffalo, New York - April 7, 2017 - After attending Thursday's Senate Aviation Subcommittee hearing as part of the FAA Reauthorization process, the 'Families of Continental Flight 3407' expressed serious concerns over a very one-sided panel of witnesses focused on rolling back critical regional airline safety measures enacted in the wake of the crash of Flight 3407 in February 2009 outside of Buffalo, New York.

"Yesterday's hearing was basically an infomercial for the 'pilot shortage cartel,' cronyism lobbying at the highest level, with the regional airlines and flight schools trying to muddy the waters on the critical new regional airline safety measures that Congress unanimously enacted in response to a series of fatal crashes at the regional airline level," declared John Kausner of Clarence Center, New York, who lost his twenty-four year old daughter Ellyce as the plane crashed less than a mile away from their home. "When it comes to safety, in just two short years the subcommittee has gone from listening to the testimony of Captain Sullenberger, one of the most experienced and celebrated pilots in history, to taking the word of the mayor of Pierre, and that's certainly not a step in the right direction in our book. Clearly the number of enplanements and reliability of air service has declined in Pierre since 2013, but to blame that on a national pilot shortage conveniently overlooks the fact that this service has been provided by Great Lakes Airlines, consistently one of the worst actors in the regional airline industry - we strongly believe that the pilot shortage affecting Pierre was simply a shortage of pilots being willing to work for the food-stamp level wages and less-than-optimal working conditions historically offered by that airline. In the meantime, Great Lakes is leading the charge in Washington begging for this legislative 'bailout' from Congress so that it can continue to pocket millions of dollars in federal subsidies and meet the absolute bare minimums when it comes to safety. So it should come as no surprise to any member of the subcommittee to hear the mayor admit that since Pierre changed regional service from Great Lakes to ADI last year that air service at that airport has been on the rebound."

The family group also cited numbers provided by the FAA indicating that since the new rules went into effect, the annual number of newly-certificated commercial airline pilots has been nearly double the projected number of industry openings. Since 2014, the pool of newly-issued Airline Transport Pilot (ATP) and Restricted-ATP pilots, as well as pilots exiting the military has consistently exceeded 11,000 per year, with the corresponding yearly demand for new pilots in the Part 121 environment lying in the range of 3000-5000. The family group also pointed to a recent Inspector General report on pilot pay, which highlighted a few lower-level regional airlines with average first officer salaries in the \$20,000-\$29,000 range, as evidence of the regional carriers who are having difficulty attracting pilots and providing reliable air service. Not surprisingly, the IG report indicates that first officers at these airlines only spent an average of 1.6-1.8 years working for these carriers.

"First of all, we cannot allow anyone in Congress to overlook the fact that the results of these newly implemented safety measures speak for themselves; Flight 3407 was the sixth fatal regional airline crash over the previous decade, and in the eight years since the crash occurred and this safety bill was passed, there have been zero fatal crashes, the longest such period in our history by far" stated Karen Eckert, of Williamsville, New York, who lost her sister and noted 9/11 widow and activist Beverly Eckert. "To lower the safety bar would be absolutely irresponsible and send the weakest links in the regional airline industry the wrong message that it is acceptable to return to their short-cutting ways. More importantly, all of this maneuvering directed towards watering down these stronger first officer qualification requirements distracts us from what is truly necessary in creating a robust pilot supply moving into the future; the importance of getting young people excited about flying, of finding ways to make flight training more affordable, and more creative, outside-the-box approaches to creating flow-through agreements and stable career pathways for aspiring young pilots. And we would be remiss if we didn't shine a bright light on a very poor industry business model that allows the mainline carriers to charge fees for everything under the sun and generate record profits, which in turn do not trickle down to the regional carriers and instead create tremendous pressures from a cost standpoint. This is not conducive to regional airlines being able to make the best decisions for safety, and to resource their pilots in the best way possible. As this FAA reauthorization process moves forward, we will continue to be extremely vigilant and vocal to ensure that the crucial safety advances that were paid for in blood by our loved ones are not allowed to be trampled upon."