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April 11, 2017

The Honorable Elaine Chao
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, D.C. 20590

Dear Secretary Chao:

Yesterday the world witnessed a disturbing, distressing video of United Airlines having police literally pull a passenger off a flight. The degrading treatment of this individual is the latest example of a major U.S. airline disrespecting passengers and denying them their basic rights. I understand the Department of Transportation is "reviewing" this matter, but I demand a stronger commitment. Your agency must conduct a swift, sweeping investigation into United Airlines and the industry practices that led to this incident.

According to countless reports, the airline wanted to bump four passengers from a Chicago to Louisville flight so that four United employees could have those seats instead, having either oversold seats on the plane or having failed to properly schedule its crew. The airline offered passengers \$400, then \$800, before finally picking people supposedly at random, demanding they disembark. One passenger apparently questioned these efforts. The airline summoned police officials, who then dragged the customer off the flight as passengers – and now millions around the world – watched in horror. In the wake of the incident, United has stood by its actions.

In your investigation, I urge you to provide answers on several key issues.

First, federal law sets a maximum compensation amount of \$1350 for passengers who are involuntarily bumped. What steps are you taking to ensure passengers get the maximum they are due and are not severely shortchanged at the whim of the airline?

Second, a DOT investigation last year revealed airline employees astonishingly ignorant of passenger rights, leading to fines on several airlines. What steps are you taking to ensure airlines are now respecting passenger protections?

Third, what steps are you taking to ensure airlines are not prioritizing their employees over passengers, bumping them with little recourse to accommodate airlines' work schedules?

Finally, what steps are you taking to assess the problem of overbooking passengers throughout the industry, especially as airlines have sought to restrict capacity? If passengers had not had cameras at the Chicago airport, this incident may not have come to light, limiting the public from seeing the pervasiveness of the problem.

United Airlines is a private, for-profit company relying on publicly financed infrastructure – and now, apparently, a public police force – to punish passengers. You are uniquely positioned to defend passengers' rights, as passengers are – wrongly – denied the right to sue. I am working on a passenger bill of rights to correct these dramatic deficiencies. But in the meantime, travelers everywhere want and deserve an explanation.

Sincerely,



RICHARD BLUMENTHAL
United States Senate