Flight attendants and the dangers of fatigue

Flight attendants are the first responders when we fly – 30,000 feet in the air, miles from police, ambulances or other help – they’re there to take care of emergencies and ensure the aircraft is safe and secure so passengers can sit back, relax and get from point A to point B. Too often flight attendants are pushed to the brink, working exhausting shifts in the skies, enduring grueling schedules with little time off for rest. This compromises their ability to carry out key tasks we as passengers take for granted: completing safety checklists; ensuring the plane can be evacuated within seconds of a crash landing; being able to handle a medical emergency; dealing with drunk, disorderly passengers; taking care of unaccompanied minors; and assisting seniors and persons with special needs.

Policy necessary to ensure flight attendants get reasonable opportunities for rest

Ensure equal time off between duty periods: On domestic flights, flight attendants are given as few as eight hours off between duty periods. This includes time spent deplaning the aircraft, transiting from the airport to a hotel, eating, sleeping, transiting back to the airport, and reboarding the aircraft. Commercial pilots, however, get 10 hours off between duty periods. In addition to safety and security concerns, this problem raises gender equity issues, as flight attendants are nearly 80 percent female yet pilots are almost 95 percent male. Flight attendants are simply asking for 10 hours off after the end of their last duty period – just like the commercial pilots they serve alongside.

This bill gives flight attendants 10 off hours off in between duty periods, the same as pilots.

Require the Inclusion of flight attendants in airlines’ fatigue risk management plans: In 2009, after the Colgan disaster in which a regional commuter jet crashed in Buffalo and 50 people were killed – 49 on the plane and one on the ground – Congress undertook a renewed, vigorous re-evaluation of pilot fatigue, which was one of the culprits of the crash. Throughout 2010 and 2011, Congress issued mandates for the FAA to require greater rest for pilots, limit flight time for pilots, and ensure air carriers create fatigue risk management plans. Those plans establish policies and procedures for reducing the risk of fatigue, like improving scheduling practices and enhancing education. Airlines are required to submit these plans to the FAA for approval and endure constant re-evaluation and oversight to ensure they’re effective. If airlines fail to comply, they’re subject to fines. These plans, however, apply solely to pilots. There is no requirement they include flight attendants.

This bill requires airlines to include flight attendants within their fatigue risk management plans, ensuring they have FAA-approved policies in place so flight attendants receive adequate rest.