December 11, 2017

Starting the Conversation to Tackle Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault

A national discussion on sexual assault and sexual harassment has lifted the veil on a silent epidemic in our society. This provides us with an opportunity for real change that advances equality and safety for all of our sisters and brothers. As Flight Attendants we have a unique opportunity to join a positive dialogue about the change we want to see and the world we want for our children. We are on the frontlines of public discussion, and we must also recognize what this moment means for our careers, our flying partners and all of the people on our planes.

We commend Alaska Airlines CEO Brad Tilden who took the opportunity to learn from a recent event on an Alaska plane. Instead
of being critical of the victim or the Flight Attendants, he and his management team recognized this as a moment for reflection. They took swift corrective action to support the victim and support the Flight Attendants. Alaska management is now working with AFA Flight Attendant leaders at Alaska to address this issue in a meaningful way.

The Washington Post asked AFA President Sara Nelson to write an Op-Ed, along with fifteen other leaders from different professions, as a means to use this moment to make real change and take us forward. The question the Post asked was, “What is the one thing that could be done to end sexual harassment?”

The Op-Ed in the Washington Post was published over the weekend. In it, we called on "airline chief executives to clearly and forcefully denounce the past objectification of flight attendants, reinforce our safety role as aviation’s first responders and pledge zero tolerance of sexual harassment and sexual assault at the airlines."

United Airlines CEO Oscar Munoz immediately responded to our Op-Ed with a public letter to all of United’s employees. In the letter, that is worth a full read, Oscar definitively states, “When you join the United team, or when you board a United flight, you can be sure that by doing so you are expressing your support of a company that backs up our words with our actions...We have a special responsibility to [Flight Attendants] to ensure they can do their essential work in the most positive environment possible. There is no place for sexual harassment at United, and I am asking that you all join with me in making a commitment to zero tolerance for sexual harassment of any of our colleagues and customers.”

AFA calls on all other airlines to follow Alaska’s and United's lead to help end sexual harassment and spread the message through
aviation that everyone has an equal seat at the table.

Let’s recognize the founders of our union and all of the women and men who have fought for respect on the job. They negotiated contracts, achieved laws and regulations that back us up. While we are still 80 percent women in our career, this issue is not specific to gender or race. In 2018, we will include a real focus from our union to lift up all issues of equality – giving voice and a platform for all of the diversity among our ranks to strengthen our union and give space for everyone to participate as much as possible.

This is a moment where we can put “coffee, tea or me” behind us and lift our careers. This is a moment where the real conversation begins. If you have something to share please let us know at issues@afacwa.org or share with your AFA Local Council. And, if any of us needs confidential support and assistance, please use AFA EAP as your resource. Call 800-424-2406 for assistance.

Keep up all you do every day to take care of one another. Thank you and fly safe.

In the News

- AFA President Sara Nelson in The Washington Post
- A Letter from United Airlines CEO Oscar Munoz
- AFA Press Release
- ‘I just wanted off the plane’: Sexual assaults often unreported by airlines, so Seattle woman starts campaign, The Seattle Times, December 7, 2017
- Flight attendants need to feel empowered to fight harassment, Runway Girl Network, December 5, 2017
- Not just Randi Zuckerberg: Sexual harassment on flights reportedly pervasive, NBC News, December 2, 2017
- U.S. flight crews ill-equipped for sexual harassment complaints, Reuters, December 1, 2017
• For Flight Attendants, Sexual Assault Isn’t Just Common, It’s Almost A Given, The Huffington Post, November 22, 2017