American Airlines Passenger Service Agents Should Not be Dying on The Job.

On August 11, 2019, Kendrick Hudson, a 24-year-old American Airlines/Piedmont employee at Charlotte Douglas International Airport, died on the job when the vehicle he was driving flipped over after hitting a piece of baggage that had fallen out of a luggage cart.¹

Hudson's union, the Communications Workers of America (CWA), has been participating in the investigation of Hudson's death and believes the primary contributing factors were safety hazards that workers report to have experienced in the workplace, including poor visibility on the tarmac at night due to insufficient lighting; baggage on the ground that had fallen from a baggage cart; hard-to-see, painted lines meant to direct vehicle traffic on the tarmac; and limited stability of the tug vehicle Hudson was driving, causing it to flip over after it hit the piece of baggage.

Hudson was employed by Piedmont Airlines, which is a wholly-owned subsidiary of American Airlines Group operating flights from nearly 80 airports across the country. Piedmont is part of the American Eagle “regional” network that operates fifty-four percent of American's domestic departures. Piedmont employs approximately 6,000 passenger and fleet service agents whose responsibilities include boarding passengers, servicing planes on the tarmac, loading and unloading baggage, and ensuring flights depart on time.

Despite agents’ important role ensuring safe, efficient air travel, these workers face serious safety risks on the job due to a combination of factors, including:

- A high stress environment, constant time pressure demands, understaffing, mandatory overtime, and high turnover;
- Defective or broken equipment and vehicles;
- Passenger rage/violence;
- A wide range of other safety and health hazards, such as ergonomic risks, chemical exposures, biological/infectious diseases, falls from heights, and heat stress;
- Insufficient or ineffective safety training; and
- Fear of retaliation by management for raising safety concerns.

Being understaffed is the number one safety concern because we are rushed to do our jobs which raises the risk of missing safety steps.

Sandy Wizzard, CLT Airport

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Further compounding the stress of these safety hazards, workers at Piedmont are paid poverty wages that are substantially less than agents employed directly by American mainline, forcing many to work long hours, take additional jobs and rely on government assistance to get by. Further, a majority of Piedmont employees are part-time, which equates to fewer benefits and less consistent schedules.

Survey of Piedmont Airlines Agents Finds Widespread Safety Problems

CWA conducted a survey of nearly 500 Piedmont agents across the country in December 2019, with a focus on Charlotte Douglas International Airport. The respondents work as ramp agents (54%), gate and ticket agents (23%), and as cross-utilized agents who handle both sets of duties at smaller airports (22%).

Almost all agents are concerned about safety, with 94% reporting that safety is a very serious (63%) or a somewhat serious (31%) problem at their station.

The pressure to turn planes on time creates a stressful environment where 69% of agents fear disciplinary action for missing deadlines.

Inadequate staffing is a key concern, with 74% of agents reporting that they feel rushed to do their jobs.

- Ninety-eight percent of agents report they experience understaffing on their jobs, in all of their shifts (38%), in most of their shifts (30%) and in some of their shifts (29%).
- Understaffing causes a majority of agents to miss mandated breaks (52%) and perform tasks outside of their roles (64%). Forty-one percent report that understaffing means that workers cannot be adequately trained.
- Among gate and ticket agents, 57% report that understaffing increases the incidence of verbal and physical assault by passengers.

Ramp agents are at risk of injury because of airline and airport failures to provide a safe working environment.

- More than half of ramp agents report working frequently with defective vehicles, 34% in every shift and 20% in most shifts. The primary vehicles cited were tugs, vehicles used to move aircraft and other equipment like carts that cannot move independently, and belt-loaders, equipment with a conveyor-like ramp used to load and unload baggage and cargo from an aircraft.
- Over forty percent of ramp agents report they often lack time to thoroughly inspect ground equipment before use.
- Half of ramp agents report working on certain areas of the tarmac with insufficient or poor lighting.
• Sixty percent of ramp agents report that some of the painted lines on the tarmac are poorly defined and hard to distinguish.

• Ramp agents are at increased risk of work-related musculoskeletal disorders (WMSDs) due to loading and unloading baggage quickly and sometimes with defective belt loaders.

Gate and ticket agents are at risk of work-related musculoskeletal disorders (WMSDs) due to long periods of standing and missed breaks. Sixty percent report they are forced to work through mandated breaks and 77% are forced to stand for long periods of time.

Management does not respond adequately to agent concerns about safety.

• 62% of agents said they had told management about a safety concern in the past six months.

• Of those agents who reported safety concerns, 77% said management failed to resolve their safety concern at all (46%) or did not resolve it quickly (31%).

Unsafe working conditions and understaffing also impacts the flying public.

• One third of agents who work inside the airport said that gaps in security at the gate, including leaving secure areas unattended, is a top safety concern.

• Forty-six percent of these agents report time pressure to skip key boarding procedures, like using the carry-on bag sizer, which is important for aircraft balance and cabin storage limits.

• Of agents who work on the ramp, thirty-two percent report they often skip important safety steps to avoid taking delays.

I stress out trying to get flights out on time by myself. Sometimes PSA agents are nowhere to be found and I have to board wheelchairs. If I have a delay and only 10 minutes to board a flight by myself that is stressful.

Virginia Hoppe, CLT Airport

Leonard Mullins, IAD Airport

Morgen Thruston, PHX Airport
Recommendations

Twenty-four year old Kendrick Hudson's death while doing his job was tragic. It is unacceptable that some of the factors CWA believes contributed to his fatality remain largely unaddressed by American Airlines to date. The airline must ensure that:

- There is adequate lighting on the tarmac at all stations;
- All baggage carts have operable closures on the curtains to contain baggage;
- The painted traffic lines are visible, clear, and regularly maintained; and
- Safer tugs with greater stability and improved safety features are provided.

More broadly, American Airlines must commit to a comprehensive approach to improve working conditions at all stations to prevent other fatalities, injuries, and illnesses. To accomplish this, American must invest more in the health and safety of its employees by:

- Providing a safe physical work environment;
- Ensuring that employees have quality training to work safely;
- Reducing workplace stressors to improve job quality;
- Addressing work organization issues such as understaffing, excessive workloads, and unpredictable work schedules that increase the risk of injury and impact health;
- Encouraging employees to report safety concerns without fear of retaliation; and
- Ensuring employees have a voice on the job through labor-management health and safety committees that are empowered to address hazards on an on-going basis.

Passenger service agents deserve respect. Their hard work keeps air travelers safe and ensures they get where they need to go. They have the right to do that work in a safe environment.