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Testimony of Congressman Brian Higgins

Thank you, Chairman Graves and Ranking Member Larsen, for allowing me the opportunity to testify today.

On February 12, 2009, Colgan Air Flight 3407 crashed in my community of Western New York, killing everyone on board and one the ground.

In the aftermath of the crash an investigation conducted by the National Transportation Safety Board concluded that the tragic accident was avoidable and caused by pilot error.

The victims' families did not blame the pilots themselves, because they were victims too. They blamed the system that allowed inadequately trained pilots to fly our commercial planes.

Following the tragedy, the Families of Flight 3407 turned their pain and sadness into action, fighting tirelessly to deliver flight safety reforms in the Federal Aviation Administration Act of 2010.

This included measures addressing pilot fatigue, consumer transparency, the pilot records database, and pilot training requirements, like the 1,500-hour training rule.

These regulations were put in place 14 years ago and as a result our skies have never been safer.

Since 2010 commercial aviation fatalities have been reduced by 99.8%.

But this year as the FAA Reauthorization process continues, some are calling the hard-fought 1,500-hour pilot training rule into question.

These changes could prioritize special interests over passengers.

SkyWest Airlines is the latest airline attempting to circumvent these critical flight safety standards. If their application before the Department of Transportation is approved, their operations would be reclassified to conduct scheduled passenger operations as a commuter air carrier.

This example, if unchecked and unchallenged, will pave the way for other regional airlines to operate at substantially lower safety standards by using substantially less trained first officer pilots.

This week I wrote a bipartisan letter with my Western New York colleague Congressman Nick Langworthy urging U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg and the US Department of Transportation to deny their request.

Protecting the 1,500-hour pilot training rule isn't a partisan issue, it's about maintaining the safety of our air space.

There are many components to flight safety training.

Pilots learn how to obtain a weather report and use it to plan how much fuel is needed, they develop and file the safest and most efficient flight safety plan, and they read the Notice to Air Missions (or NOTAMs).

Pilots also perform preflight inspections on the aircraft itself, making sure that the landing gear, doors, and other equipment are up to standard.

As a pilot himself, I'm sure Chairman Graves understands that student pilots do not gain this experience using flight simulators alone.

These are safety habits learned through many hours of real flight experience that pilots gain under the current training procedures.

If Congress is not pushing industry to the highest and most rigorous levels of training, with strict scrutiny on any training that minimizes real flight experience, we risk abridging the safety standards that we know have worked.

The Flight 3407 crash was preventable.

I have stood by flight 3407 families from the beginning as they fought to ensure that no other families or communities experience a tragedy like that one that took place in Clarence, New York.

I will continue to do so anytime their goals are at risk.

As hearings and debate continue regarding the 2023 Federal Aviation Administration Reauthorization Act, I urge this Congress leave these safety and training standards intact.

Every American that steps on a plane deserves the peace of mind that there is one level of safety among all US airlines.

These standards are commonsense, and they must remain in place for the safety of the Western New York community and all others across the United States.