




U.S. Department
of Transportation
Federal Highway
Administration

Memorandum

Subject: ACTION: Title VI Complaint Against
United Airline at the McGhee-Tyson Airport
in Knoxville, Tennessee

Date: July 2, 2012

From: Warren S. Whitlock 
Associate Administrator for Civil Rights

In Reply Refer To: HCR-40

To: Mr. Joseph Austin
Associate Director, External Policy and
Program Division (S-33)

Attached is a complaint for referral to the Air Carrier Protection Division in General Counsel for appropriate action. The issue raised in the complaint is not within the FHWA's jurisdiction. The issue involves citizens who allege discrimination based on national origin (Hispanic/Yaqui) by a United Airlines supervisor who allegedly bullied, harassed, and frightened the complainants. Specifically, the complainants allege that the representative shouted, threw things, and tampered with the complainants' tickets. The FHWA Office of Civil Rights received the complaint on June 26, 2012. If you have any questions about this submission, please contact Ms. Thalia Williams at 202-366-1595. Thank you.

Attachment

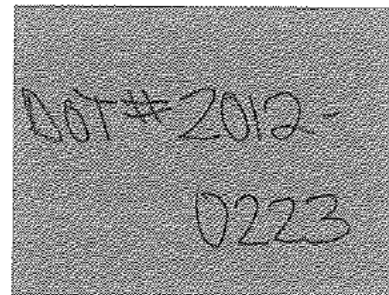
cc:

Ms. Pamela M. Kordenbrock, Division Administrator, FHWA (HDA-TN)

Ms. Joi Hamilton-Jones, Civil Rights Specialist, FHWA (HDA-TN)

Ms. Cammie Davenport Woodle, Executive Director, Civil Rights, Tennessee DOT

Federal Highway Administration
U.S. Department of Transportation
Office of Civil Rights
1200 New Jersey Ave, SE
8th Floor, E81-314
Washington, DC 20590



Re: Flight confirmation (b) (6)
Passengers: (b) (6)

June 21, 2012

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is (b) (6) and I believe my civil rights were violated by United Airlines due to my Hispanic/Yaqui heritage. (b) (6) and (b) (6) were subjected to the fallout of this violation. United Airlines supervisor (b) (6) discriminated, bullied, harassed, and frightened us; her actions were unconscionable. She shouted, threw things and tampered with our tickets. It is inconceivable that United Airlines would support someone of this contemptible nature.

On June 1, 2012, at the United ticket counter in the McGhee-Tyson Airport in Knoxville, Tennessee, we were informed that our return flight had been cancelled due to weather conditions. After asking my name and where I was from, the agent commented angrily that she was not from Tennessee but lived in Whittier, California. She printed out boarding passes and handed them to me. When I asked for options in rebooking our flight, she completely dismissed my request. I requested assistance for lodging and meals and she informed me that in the 32 years she'd been with United, no one had ever received vouchers for an "act of God." I asked to speak to a supervisor and she said, "That's me," and pounded on the ticket machine saying, "damned Continental equipment."

We tried to enter the airport through security, but realized that she had not given us boarding passes. I went back and informed the supervisor and she responded, "do you see the line behind you?" I reminded her that I had waited in line earlier and she had failed to give us boarding passes. She rolled her eyes and produced three boarding passes.

The TSA checkpoint had now closed, so we went to the Tennessee Airport Hilton to dine. While having our meal, a white family of four sat down and stated to the server that they had received both hotel and food vouchers from United Airlines. I approached them and they confirmed that they had been on our cancelled flight and that the United supervisor had issued them hotel and food vouchers for their entire family. I returned to the United counter to inquire why vouchers had been given to one family and not to mine. The supervisor denied this at first, then reluctantly admitted that she had given them because "I felt sorry for them," "they didn't have any money," "they were old," and, lastly, "they were handicapped." I told her that we had a handicapped person as well. She began to shout that she could do whatever she wanted and that I had no right to ask her for anything.

I asked her to lower her voice and then for her name and a phone number for United's customer service. She waved her badge at me and began to laugh and berate me in front of the other United employees. Speechless and embarrassed, I stepped away and contacted a customer service agent regarding Supervisor (b) (6) behavior. Apologizing, he offered all members in my party a \$150 voucher for any future United flight.

Later, (b) (6) were seated downstairs when (b) (6) approached them, shouting and waving her hands in the air. She took an aggressive stance pointing, threatening and shouting that (b) (6) should

have told her that she was handicapped. (b) (6) then threw hotel vouchers at her, stated that she was going to take a four-week furlough and began to cry. When she left, she shouted that when she went to church on Sunday, she was going to pray that something bad would happen to me. As I rounded the corner she looked at me and said, "Tell that to customer service."

I sent the others to the hotel fearful that (b) (6) could cause further complications or become unhinged enough to harm them. Given the escalation of (b) (6) behavior, I contacted United customer service again and requested an earlier flight out of Knoxville. I was told that there had been earlier flights, but that (b) (6) had chosen not to offer them. The earliest flight available was through U.S. Air and according to the agent, other than rebooking our flight; there was no other recourse for (b) (6) behavior.

Saturday, June 2nd, we arrived at the airport three hours in advance and checked in at the U.S. Air counter. When boarding began at the gate, the U.S. Air attendant stopped us because our passes were invalid. He said that we would have to go back downstairs and speak to United's supervisor whom we knew to be (b) (6). Exhausted and in shock, we watched the ramp door shut, leaving us to find another way home. At the United counter, as we explained our situation, the workers there began to laugh. Although we asked to see Supervisor (b) (6) she would not see us. No one at the desk would rebook our flight.

When I called United Customer Service again, he verified that the boarding passes were valid. I told him that I believed that (b) (6) was responsible for denying us access to our flight in retaliation for contacting United's customer service. He stated that outside of booking another flight, there was nothing he could do about her behavior. In rebooking, he did include a special note stating that no one could alter or tamper with our tickets, but could not guarantee that changes would not be made. He assured me that I would be reimbursed for all expenditures related to this layover.

After discussion, we opted to leave Knoxville -- or the entire state of Tennessee -- to board another flight. I called United customer service again and booked a flight out of Nashville. This agent also stated, as the last agent had, that our previous boarding passes were valid but had not been endorsed by United. We rented another car, drove to Nashville and spent the night in a motel to accommodate (b) (6) special needs.

Sunday, June 3rd, I called United customer service for the fourth time to verify our flight. We were informed at the airport that (b) (6) did not have a confirmed seat on the second leg of our flight from Houston to LA. In addition, we were told that United could not assign us a seat until we got to Houston. The stress caused (b) (6) to require a wheelchair for the remainder of the trip. At Houston, (b) (6) was assigned a seat and we were able to fly to LAX.

I am an educated, professional woman as are my traveling companions. We came to Tennessee for both pleasure and business. I believe that United Airlines Supervisor (b) (6) is a racist, bigoted, hateful, unstable individual. The egregious actions taken by (b) (6) and her staff had a profound effect on all of us and I cannot even begin to tell you how reluctant we are to travel again to Tennessee. (b) (6) is suffering with illness brought on by the stress and (b) (6) and I took a full week to recover. We are seeking legal advice regarding this matter. Should you require more information, I can be reached at (b) (6).

Cordially, (b) (6)

(b) (6)

cc: Jeff Smisek, CEO United Airlines
Commissioner John Schroer, Tennessee Department of Transportation
Esther Aguilera, Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute

Tennessee Congressman John J. Duncan, Jr.
Tennessee Governor Bill Haslam
Tennessee Senator Lamar Alexander
Tennessee Senator Bob Corker
Knox County Mayor Tim Burchett
Knoxville Mayor Madeline Rogero
Mike Edwards, Knoxville Chamber of Commerce
Kim Davis, Knoxville Convention and Visitors Bureau

(b) (6)

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