



Statement for the Record Submitted to the U.S. House Committee on Transportation & Infrastructure,
Subcommittee on Aviation

“Bridging the Gap: Improving Diversity and Inclusion in the U.S. Aviation Workforce”
July 20, 2021

The Regional Airline Association (RAA) thanks the U.S. House Committee on Transportation & Infrastructure, Subcommittee on Aviation for holding the hearing titled, “Bridging the Gap: Improving Diversity and Inclusion in the U.S. Aviation Workforce.” RAA submits this statement for the record to inform the Committee on the regional airline industry’s efforts to foster and support a diverse and inclusive aviation workforce and urge additional partnership between the federal government and the aviation industry to promote a robust, diverse, and well-trained aviation workforce.

The Regional Airline Association has seventeen airline members and, collectively, our industry employs approximately 70,000 individuals who work every day to deliver passengers and cargo to their destinations and uphold the highest principles and practices of aviation safety. As has been well documented, the United States is facing substantial workforce shortages for aviation maintenance technicians and pilots in the immediate and near-term, and much of the long-term health of the regional airline industry rests on our collective ability to resolve these shortages. It is RAA’s position that we will only be able to meet this objective by recruiting and attracting more diverse people from a variety of backgrounds into our industry. In addition, our members are committed to diversity and inclusion as a both a deeply held value and a long-term business strategy, which is embedded within their hiring practices for all career paths and supported by business operations that foster a work environment where employees can embrace who they are and freely share their varied backgrounds, experiences and perspectives. Broadly, efforts to reach and attract diverse candidates focus on three interrelated strategies, which include financial assistance for education and training; outreach, partnerships, and pathway programs; and representation.

As the industry sector that hires more first year pilots than any other, we have a unique perspective to share. While today’s statement presents only a small sampling of the many programs underway today to foster diversity and inclusion among our member airlines, these examples illustrate how outreach to underrepresented populations as well as inclusion and support programs at airlines present two key elements of building and

maintaining a diverse aviation workforce. We also hope to draw attention to a missing element, highlighting a key role for the US Government to play in leveling the playing field for aspiring aviators by ensuring equitable access to training through rightsized student loans. To succeed in building a diverse and vibrant aviation workforce, aviation candidates must be supported at every step, from early career aspirations, through education and training and into a welcoming and inclusive post-hire environment.

Airlines have made continuous investments in these arenas, making considerable headway through programs designed to spark career interest among candidates who have been historically underrepresented in the career, while offering rewarding careers to a diverse workforce. Nonetheless, no amount of generated interest, and no amount of investment in a post-hire environment, can make up for the tremendous disconnect that transpires when some students and families have the financial wherewithal to access training, while others do not. Airlines are stepping in here as well, with moves that garner headlines, such as the development of airline owned or sponsored flight training institutions with deep tuition subsidies and airline-backed lending, as well as other programs like scholarships, tuition reimbursements and numerous other steps to help more pilots afford training. Although these programs are important and helpful, they cannot begin to address the cost barriers facing students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and cannot fully remedy the fact that students with wealth or access to private capital can fund or finance the training required for this lucrative career, but students without those means cannot. This inequity in training access is a fundamental public policy problem that must be addressed to successfully foster a diverse future workforce.

Financial Assistance for Flight Education & Training

The high cost of flight education and training prevents many individuals from becoming pilots when they cannot pay for the training outright or qualify for private loans. The high costs of pilot training pose a particular barrier for students from lower income households. According to the Brookings Institute, the median white household has a net worth ten times that of the median black household¹. This persistent racial wealth gap means the burden of cost, as a barrier to pilot training access, falls more heavily on black families than white families. The resulting disparity in pilot training access impedes the goal of achieving diversity in the aviation workforce. These objectives have been of paramount importance to industry and lawmakers for decades, yet progress has been unacceptably slow. According to the Census Bureau Labor Force Statistics Demographic Data for Pilots &

¹ See <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brookings-now/2021/01/08/charts-of-the-week-the-racial-wealth-gap-the-middle-class-income-slump/>

Flight Engineers², the pilot profession is not diverse – with 94% of the profession identifying as White, 5.6 percent Female, 3.4 percent Black, 2.2 percent Asian and 5 percent Hispanic. Even where economic background is not statistically associated with an underrepresented population, financial barriers that deter or prevent some candidates from pursuing training further constricts an already unacceptably narrow pool of potential candidates.

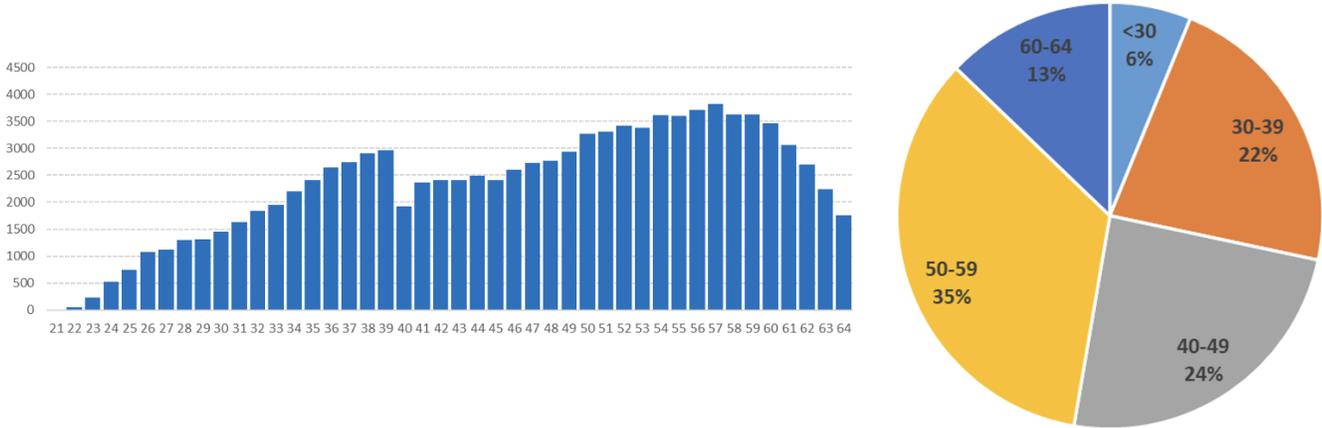
The disparities outlined above showcase some of the financial obstacles that contribute to an unacceptable lack of diversity within pilot ranks. This not only stands as an affront to the goals of a modern, vibrant and inclusive workforce, it imperils the financial health of the aviation industry. According to Boeing’s 2020 Pilot and Technician Outlook, North America will need more than 200,000 new pilots over the next 20 years, or approximately 10,000 new pilots each year. Contributing to this demand are age-driven retirements; fully 47 percent of today’s qualified commercial airline pilot workforce face mandatory retirement within the next fifteen years and roughly 13 percent of all ATP AMEL airmen with valid 1st class medicals will reach their federally mandated age-65 retirement age within five years (Figure A).

As we approach these retirements, and despite a strong job outlook and median pay of \$160,970 for airline pilots³, far too few new pilots are entering the profession to meet the projected demand. In fact, according to the U.S. Civil Airmen Statistics, only 6,664 Airline Transport Pilot (ATP) and Restricted (R-ATP) certificates were issued in 2019 and just 3,999 such certificates were issued in 2020. The monthly average through May 2021 was 257 new certificates, which is 288 lower than the average in 2019. Should production continue at current rates, 2021 is forecast to produce just 3,086 new ATP AMEL airmen; which is 53 percent fewer than 2019 (Figure B). While low certificate production in 2020 certainly reflects COVID-19 impacts, issuances remain depressed as of mid-year 2021. While these numbers may indicate some programs have been slow to recover from the pandemic, if certificate issuances do not recover more fully in the coming months, concern for a future qualified workforce only increases. In either case, high demand for airline pilots presents an additional challenge within the training pipeline, as flight schools face difficulty retaining their instructor workforce during periods of intense airline hiring.

² See *Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey*, Bureau of Labor Statistics: <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.htm>

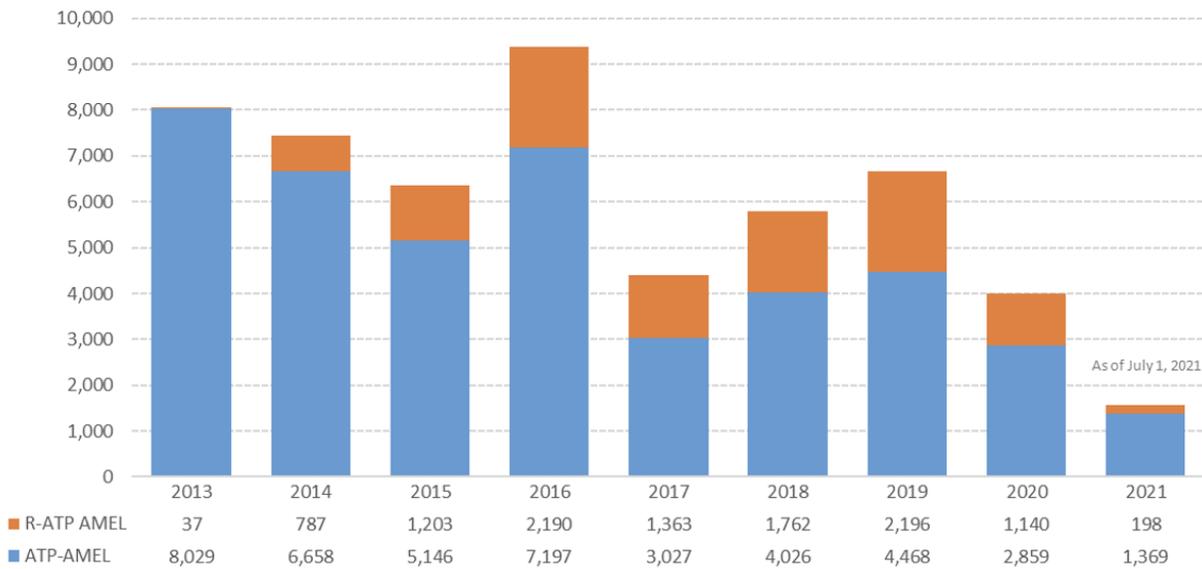
³ See *Occupation Employment and Wage Statistics, May 2020*, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Airline Pilots, Copilots, and Flight Engineers*: <https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes532011.htm>

Figure A. ATP AMEL Pilots with Valid 1st Class Medicals by Age



Data files distributed monthly by Carla Colwell, Functional Analyst, Airmen Certification Branch, Federal Aviation Administration

Figure B. Original Issuance ATP AMEL and R-ATP AMEL



Data files distributed monthly by Carla Colwell, Functional Analyst, Airmen Certification Branch, Federal Aviation Administration

To meet industry demand and create a more diverse workforce, flight education and training must be made more accessible to a larger population of candidates, especially those who are underrepresented in the profession. To do this, it is important to view the costs of training in the context of higher education assistance available to students today. Due to the cost of operating aircraft used in training programs, associated insurance requirements and the cost of flight training instruction, flight training typically adds \$80,000 to the cost of a four-year degree, for a total of at least \$120,000 for a professional pilot degree at public, in-state institution⁴. Unlike graduate students who can borrow additional student loans to support their professional studies and certifications, individuals enrolled in flight education and training programs are capped at an undergraduate student loan ceiling of \$57,500 for an independent student and \$31,000 for a dependent student. Additionally, even if the individual qualifies for the maximum yearly Pell grant award of \$6,345, there remains a substantial aid gap relative to the cost of attendance. To address this gap, RAA and other aviation stakeholders have offered a proposal for increasing the amount of federal student loan aid by \$80,000 for unsubsidized loans and \$42,000 for subsidized loans for individuals enrolled in accredited flight education and training programs. We firmly believe this will help close this aid gap and finally make the pilot profession more diverse and inclusive. Importantly, these additional loans would allow aspiring pilots to easily enroll in Department of Education Income-Driven Repayment plans to ensure that they have affordable loan payments once they graduate. RAA anticipates this proposal will be formally introduced in legislation this year. This is one of the single most important steps the US Government can play in addressing pilot training access disparity for a more inclusive and equitable career and we ask every Member of this Committee for your support for this legislation when introduced.

While the above proposal will benefit all prospective pilots, including Veterans, we want to draw additional attention to hurdles faced by Veterans who wish to use their GI bill benefits to become commercial pilots. These veterans struggle against limitations related to using their benefits for paying for their flight education and training as part of a professional pilot degree. Today, GI bill benefits cannot be used to pay for a private pilot certificate. This certificate is the first step to becoming a commercial airline pilot, and it comes at a cost of between \$10,000 and \$15,000. The inability of the GI bill to cover this cost, especially when it covers all other flight training and education costs associated with a professional pilot degree program, is a disincentive for those who wish to enter the pilot career path. The USG should fully incentivize veterans' participation in this highly lucrative and in-demand profession, and we urge Members of this Committee to work in partnerships with their

^{4 4} See: <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/paying-for-college/articles/paying-for-college-infographic>

colleagues on the House Committee of Veteran's Affairs to remove this critical impediment so that it is easier for veterans to become commercial pilots.

Outreach, Partnerships, & Pathway Programs

Alongside promoting training access equity, airlines are focusing on outreach to more diverse audiences, attracting candidates to aviation who may not have considered the career without specific outreach designed to include them. As one important means of reaching diverse populations, regional airlines partner with organizations who regularly engage and support underrepresented candidates who are seeking aviation careers, such as the Organization for Black Aviation Professionals, National Gay Pilots Association, Women in Aviation, Sisters of the Skies, Latinos Pilot Association, Professional Asians Pilots Association and others. This engagement includes supporting scholarship programs and attending events with these organizations to educate students on the careers and opportunities available to them. Many of these organizations host career fairs that offer a safe and welcoming environment for members of these communities to speak with potential employers and to even interview for a position within the company. They also host guest speakers to educate employers on awareness of diversity and inclusion issues such as implicit bias in the workforce. RAA members cite close partnerships with these organizations both in physical outreach and as a source of better understanding. Airlines have taken their lead from some of these organizations, through listening sessions with their members and employees.

Carriers also attend and host events at flight schools and collegiate programs with diverse populations, especially in communities that they serve. For example, Cape Air founded a flight training program in Owensboro, Kentucky (a community where they provide the sole source of commercial air service, through the Essential Air Service program) to make flight education and training more hands-on and accessible. Similarly, at Cape Cod Community College in Massachusetts, Cape Air invests in a 24-month airplane maintenance training program to help meet the need for highly skilled technicians, training them in airframe and power plant repair and culminating in certification—including full FAA Certification. Both programs offer further incentives if students join Cape Air after graduation. Additionally, CommutAir has assisted with funding training for Airframe and Powerplant licenses for mechanics along with prepaying for flight training hours for veterans who are transitioning from rotary to fixed wing aircraft. For civilian pilots, the carrier has also paid for certified flight instructor ratings for individuals so that it is easier for them to gain flight hours to qualify as a first officer at a Part 121 air carrier.

Airline outreach is not limited to college-age students; in fact, carriers conduct outreach to students in elementary, middle and high school in diverse school districts to help inspire an interest in aviation career paths. They also participate in aviation summer camps where students tour facilities and aircraft and speak with pilots and senior leaders about their jobs. All RAA members are engaging with their communities, offering opportunities that expose students to aviation. This outreach is also not limited to airlines. One of the most impressive examples of this outreach can be found right here in Washington, through the Aero Club of Washington Foundation. The Foundation enjoys well-deserved support from RAA and many other Washington-area aviation groups for its strong work connecting students in the District of Columbia, who might not otherwise gain any exposure to aviation, with aviation experiences, like touring a flight simulator or control tower or hearing from real, diverse people who have succeeded in aviation. More information about the Foundation is available on its website at <https://www.aeroclub.org/foundation/>.

Service members who are transitioning out of the military and veterans are also highly sought-after employees because they often have transferable skills and training that fits well within the airline industry in addition to the unique life experiences and backgrounds they bring to their work. Carriers regularly conduct outreach on military bases that are near hub locations along with attending job fairs and events and working with staffing agencies and conferences that are specifically for recruiting individuals with a military background. In one example of working with veterans, PSA Airlines has launched a Maintenance Military Transition program for mechanics that are looking to transition through an abbreviated airframe and powerplant course and test to become a mechanic. Experienced and qualified veterans are offered assistance up to \$10,000 which includes the course, testing, and a training stipend.

Additionally, many regional carriers have partnered with larger airlines to create pathway programs where pilots work at a regional airline before they move to a larger carrier. Pathway programs also partner with schools with diverse student populations, including minority serving higher education institutions like Historically Black Colleges and Hispanic Serving Institutions, as part of their recruitment and outreach efforts. These programs are designed to identify and prepare candidates for careers as pilots. Once admitted to the program, these candidates are mentored by individuals with similar backgrounds and life experiences.

In addition to recruitment and outreach, one of the major attractions of pathway programs for aspiring pilots is that they provide a career path for the individual with guarantees of employment at various stages of their career. For example, at the end of the basic training that provides a pilot with a Commercial Certificate, they will

know where they can build time to meet the hours necessary for a Restricted Airline Transport Pilot Certificate. Once that has been achieved, they will have preferred interviews or even a guaranteed seat at a regional airline. Furthermore, the pathway program will specify the time that the pilot will have to spend at the regional airline before an opening at a major airline is made available. The stability offered by pathway programs helps to encourage individuals into the industry by offering pilots career certainty, and a greater ability to predict where and when each step of their career will take place.

Many airline employees have long held aspirations to become pilots; however, like other individuals, the high cost of training has deterred them from recognizing this dream. Some regional carriers like Cape Air for instance have created internal programs to provide financial assistance to cover a portion of their employees' flight training expenses so that they can realize their dream of becoming a pilot. Republic Airways has opened its own flight training school call LIFT (Leadership in Flight Training) Academy that utilizes state of the art equipment and training practices to train the next generation of pilots. Students who successfully complete the career pathway program will have a guaranteed pathway to a career as a pilot at the air carrier. Through this program, Republic subsidizes the cost of the flight training by \$15,000 dropping the tuition from \$90,000 to \$75,000. Supporting LIFT academy is an aviation maintenance apprenticeship program in partnership with the U.S. Department of Labor, apprenticeships will learn as they earn over a thirty-six month period, and upon completion will be ready to begin a career as an Aviation Maintenance Technician.

Representation

A key element of recruiting and retaining diverse talent is ensuring representation across employee groups. As one RAA member has put it, people want and need to see other people that look like them and share their backgrounds when they choose a career path. Representation is essential for creating a safe space for employees to share their life experiences and perspectives. This challenge is most prevalent and pervasive within the pilot and mechanic ranks, which are overwhelmingly white, male dominated professions. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon to hear women and people of color share stories at career fairs about how they never thought they could become a pilot or mechanic because they never saw someone like them in the role growing up.

In one example of fostering representation, Horizon Airlines is committed to increasing its racial diversity among its leadership to better reflect the diversity in its frontline workforce. They also utilize their internship program

to support a diverse pipeline of future employees. While some aviation professions, such as pilot, flight attendant, and maintenance technicians, are better known, there are many other less well-known career paths that are critical to the success of the company. Horizon's most recent intern class was greater than 50 percent BIPOC.

Human Resource Departments for regional air carrier also often have formal goals related to recruiting diverse candidates for open roles and provide tools to leaders to help foster an environment of inclusion. For instance, Cape Air provides managers and leaders with resources to identify signs of implicit biases to help maintain a safe and inclusive workplace for women, people of color, and veterans to feel comfortable sharing their perspectives.

Tools and resources are also provided directly to employees to encourage their continued education and development. Piedmont Airlines utilizes its Employee Resource Groups to drive engagement on diversity and inclusion. In these groups, employees are provided a safe space to exchange best practices, learn, have difficult conversations, network and have fun. Similarly, PSA Airlines utilizes an Inclusion Council to provide insights from employees related to its efforts to create a more inclusive and diverse culture and workforce. Leaders on the Council work towards bringing team members together across employee groups with the aim promoting understanding and embracing differences. They also act as outreach ambassadors for PSA.

Lastly, carriers also highlight the existing diversity within their companies and their commitment to increasing representation through social media engagement, outreach efforts, and utilizing events such as Black History Month in February and Veteran's Day, to raise awareness and foster engagement throughout the company. In addition, carriers encourage their employees to authentically be themselves by showing support for diversity and diverse causes such as Black Lives Matter and Pride. Carriers emphasize that efforts must not simply follow headlines, nor should be limited to providing commentary at opportune times; instead, carriers are seeking to develop a genuine culture around including and celebrating diverse employee groups – consistently showing that support internally as well as outwardly.

Conclusion

Thank you for your leadership in holding this critical hearing. The workforce challenges facing the regional airline industry are pressing and threaten the economic health of our industry, but we believe there is also tremendous opportunity to create a more robust and diverse workforce that is representative of the communities we serve.

We stand ready to partner with the Committee to support a vibrant, diverse, and inclusive aviation workforce.
Thank you for this opportunity to provide our comments.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Faye Malarkey Black".

Faye Malarkey Black,
President and CEO