

STATEMENT OF MICHAEL HUERTA  
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before the  
AVIATION SUBCOMMITTEE,  
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE  
CONCERNING ASSISTANCE TO FAMILIES OF VICTIMS OF AIRLINE  
CRASHES  
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

I am Michael Huerta, Associate Deputy Secretary of the U.S. Department of Transportation, and I am here today on behalf of Secretary Peña to review one of the most grave, sobering and necessary tasks undertaken in the aftermath of an airliner crash--working with the families and friends of passengers and crewmembers to provide needed information, access, and appropriate resolution of the many wrenching issues that follow a crash. The focus of my testimony today is on the treatment of families after airline accidents.

Among my responsibilities as Associate Deputy Secretary is reviewing the organizational structure of the Department and its modes, to see that they work together smoothly and effectively. The information and suggestions that result from today's hearing will assist us in assuring that the arrangements within the Department best serve the interests of the families and survivors of transportation accidents.

With me is Commander Ed Gleason, United States Coast Guard, who most recently served as military assistant to the Secretary and was personally directed by the Secretary to facilitate the flow of information regarding federal activities, assistance to survivors and relatives of victims, and information among and between transportation carriers. He served as a liaison with the airlines, the National Transportation Safety Board, community organizations and the families to address the very issues the Subcommittee will be examining here today.

First and foremost, let me say that the Secretary's highest priority is to prevent transportation accidents. He and FAA Administrator David Hinson have set "zero accidents" as their goal for aviation. Secretary Peña has worked closely with this Committee and with each of the modes to improve safety performance and maintain the enviable transportation safety record of the United States.

In the tragic instances where accidents have occurred during his tenure, Secretary Peña has made communicating with families of victims and

survivors his first priority. He has traveled to the crash sites to talk to the families and to assure them of this.

Following a National Transportation Safety Board field hearing concerning the Pittsburgh Flight 427 crash, it became apparent that the families had real concerns that needed to be addressed. NTSB Chairman Hall met with the Secretary upon his return from Pittsburgh in early February 1995 to brief him on what he had learned from these families. The Secretary took their concerns seriously and therefore assigned a member of his immediate office--Cdr. Gleason--direct responsibility for assessing the steps taken by airlines as events unfold after a crash and working on the issues raised by the NTSB field hearing. The fact that Cdr. Gleason reported directly to the Secretary made it clear to all that the Secretary was personally involved--that linkage assisted Cdr. Gleason enormously in focusing attention on these issues.

It will be a year ago tomorrow that the Secretary and Chairman Hall met with some of the families of airline crash victims to discuss their concerns and further identify areas for improvement when these types of tragic accidents occur. As a result of that meeting, in August 1995, the Secretary, Chairman Hall, and DOT staff met with representatives of 10 airlines and Amtrak to address issues raised by the families. The airlines were receptive and, following the meeting, the Air Transport Association took a leadership role and formed a working group comprised of representatives from several airlines to examine the issues and recommendations presented.

We are encouraged by the initiative shown by this group, and we believe that this effort has been extremely useful to the carriers as a forum to exchange response-plan options. We also expanded our efforts successfully to commuter air carriers. The Department continues to monitor the progress of the working group.

Anytime a major transportation disaster occurs, there is an immediate need to make clear the different, complementary roles of federal, state and local agencies, so the affected families know where to turn for particular assistance.

I would like to take a moment to summarize the roles played by others in responding to an airline accident. The first official responders to major transportation disasters are the state and local police, fire departments, and paramedics. Their primary role is to help the survivors. They work to provide emergency medical care and other assistance to the survivors; eliminate dangerous conditions that may continue to cause harm (fires, downed electrical lines, debris, etc.); provide for the recovery and identification of the victims; and restrict access to the site to ensure that unauthorized people are not interfering with efforts to attend to the dead and injured. The local coroner is responsible for positive identification of the victims.

The governor's office will bring together state resources, such as the National Guard, to assist as necessary.

While not assigned a role under statute or otherwise, the American Red Cross can be called upon to provide care for the survivors, families and the rescue workers.

Depending on the size of the disaster, several federal agencies may be involved in the response. As you know, the National Transportation Safety Board, which is also on this panel today, conducts impartial investigations into major aviation and other transportation accidents. The NTSB determines the cause of the accident and may issue recommendations to improve transportation safety. Most important in the context of today's hearing, the Board provides official information to survivors, family members of victims, and others on the details of the accidents. The NTSB directs efforts at the crash site, controlling access and taking other steps to preserve the evidence instrumental to a successful investigation.

As I noted at the outset, we at the Department of Transportation set standards for safety and other key aspects of the transportation system and enforce established safety regulations. The Secretary of Transportation, representing the President, will often travel to the site and survey, firsthand, the accident scene. The Secretary does not comment on the cause of the accident since the investigation is the responsibility of the NTSB. The Secretary is responsible for responding to any safety recommendations made by the NTSB.

The Department of State is involved when an accident involving U.S. citizens occurs outside the United States. The State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs responds to the needs of those affected by an overseas accident by obtaining information and passing it on to the next-of-kin. The Bureau of Consular Affairs also assists with the logistical needs of the families and survivors.

The carrier involved in the accident usually provides a direct link to families of victims or survivors. This includes initial notification and, when necessary, arranging for travel to and accommodations at the accident locality, as well as a wide range of personal support services and the return or other disposition of personal effects.

In conclusion Mr. Chairman, this Administration, Secretary Peña, and the Department of Transportation will continue to do everything we can to maintain and enhance what already is the safest transportation system in the world. We, like everyone here, truly regret that we ever have to be concerned about a transportation accident.

Under Secretary Peña's leadership, we will continue to put people first. The Secretary will continue to ensure that his immediate staff serves as a line of communication for families.

We are also working with the National Transportation Safety Board, other federal agencies, and survivors and relatives of victims to develop an information guide that can be provided to persons who, for whatever reason, may be affected by a future major transportation accident. Our goal in developing this guide is to provide a ready source of basic information during a very trying and difficult time.

I understand that the Committee will hear from another panel following this one, and that members of that panel may have specific proposals for improvements in the system I have described. Along with the Committee, we will evaluate these and any other suggestions in order to bring about desirable changes. We believe that this hearing is very timely in addressing the issues before us and developing solutions.

This completes my prepared statement. Cdr. Gleason and I would be pleased to respond to any questions you or Members of the Committee may have.