

MPOWER CHANGE

MUSLIM GRASSROOTS MOVEMENT

May 9, 2016

Mr. Gary Kelly
Chairman of the Board, President, & CEO
Southwest Airlines

Dear Mr. Kelly,

The undersigned organizations and leaders, representing non-profit, civil society, advocacy, and netroots organizations, alongside Muslim and Arab communities across the United States, write to ask for your formal response to the disturbing trend of anti-Muslim and anti-Arab incidents on Southwest Airlines flights. We call on you to formally apologize to those impacted by recent incidents and review the airline's policies and procedures, particularly those related to how the credibility of threats and allegations is assessed and the standards used to remove or bar passengers from flights. We also ask that you develop and implement anti-bias training for flight crews and other personnel that interact directly with passengers.

Though discrimination may not be a formal policy of Southwest Airlines, recent actions by your employees have heightened concerns among our organizations and communities about the hostile environment created for Arab and Muslim passengers on your flights. Repeatedly, baseless accusations from other passengers and employees feeling "uncomfortable" have led your airline to take significant, even drastic action, while the public humiliation, distress, and delays caused to Arab and Muslim passengers have been brushed off with references to "proper procedures" and "following protocol." These cases are leading to a widespread fear and rejection of travel on Southwest flights amongst our communities.

The pattern of incidents raises serious questions about the procedures and protocols used by Southwest Airlines and the employee culture cultivated at your organization. While your airline claims to follow the principle of #SouthwestHeart, this value seems to be applied differently to customers that are Arab, Muslim, or perceived to be Muslim.

Should Arabic speakers use special precautions when traveling with Southwest?

On April 6th, members of the flight crew removed 26 year old Khairuldeen Makhzoomi from an Oakland-bound flight after another passenger overheard him speaking Arabic on his phone and perceived the conversation as threatening. Southwest employees then called the authorities and Makhzoomi was humiliated and subjected to an FBI interrogation—simply for making a phone call to his uncle.

Last November, your staff blocked two men from boarding a flight to Philadelphia after a customer reportedly felt "uncomfortable" after hearing them speaking Arabic while waiting to enter the plane. Does your airline apply the same treatment to passengers speaking other languages?

Does a prohibition on switching seats apply only to passengers that are Arab, Muslim, or perceived to be Muslim?

The boarding section of your website states: "We don't assign seats on our flights, so feel free to sit in any available seat once you board the plane." But for Arab and Muslim passengers, your staff seem to apply a different set of rules.

On April 13th, a Southwest flight attendant removed Hakima Abdulle, a woman of Somali descent wearing a hijab, from a flight after she and another passenger agreed to switch seats. Your flight attendant stated that she "did not feel comfortable" with Abdulle, who was traveling to help a pregnant relative in Seattle and was brought to tears after the humiliating experience.

This follows another incident last November, in which several Arabic-speaking customers were removed from a Southwest flight after other passengers said their attempts to sit together made them feel uneasy.

Is every allegation or discomfort grounds for removing or barring passengers from flights?

All of the cases above were caused by Southwest Airlines employees accepting another passenger or employee feeling uncomfortable or perceiving a threat from a Muslim or Arab passenger as sufficient reason to bar or remove them from a flight. Are employees trained such that the mere sight or sound of customers of certain backgrounds is treated as an actionable threat? Would the same procedures apply if a Muslim or Arab customer felt uncomfortable or perceived a threat of discriminatory action from staff or passengers?

No one should be made to feel unsafe on a flight or denied service because of their race, religion, or the language they speak. Yet, your airline has created an environment where customers who are Arab, Muslim, or perceived to be Muslim are today fearful to fly Southwest.

And with this disturbing trend of incidents on Southwest flights coinciding with a national spike in anti-Muslim rhetoric, sentiment, and violence, it is especially important that your airline begin to address these concerns.

We call on you to take the following actions:

1. Issue public apologies to Khairuldeen Makhzoomi and Hakima Abdulle;
2. Review policies and procedures around how allegations from passengers and staff are elevated to become actionable and standards used for removing passengers or barring them from flights; and
3. Develop and implement anti-bias training for all staff that interact directly with customers.

We look forward to the day when all customers, regardless of race, religion, or background, are afforded the #SouthwestHeart that your company claims as a core value.

Sincerely,

MPower Change
18 Million Rising
ACCESS of WNY, Inc.
American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)
Arab American Association of New York
Asian American Psychological Association
Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance AFL-CIO (APALA)
Auburn Seminary
CAAAV Organizing Asian Communities

CAIR - Maryland Outreach Dept.
Center for Constitutional Rights
Council on American–Islamic Relations (CAIR)
Courage Campaign
Evolutionary Leadership, LLC
ICNA Council for Social Justice
Iraq Veterans Against the War
Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA)
Islamic Society of North America (ISNA)
Michigan Muslim Community Council
Missouri Immigrant and Refugee Advocates
Mizna
MoveOn.Org
Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative (MuslimARC)
Muslim Legal Fund of America (MLFA)
Muslims for Ferguson
National Asian Pacific American Families Against Substance Abuse (NAPAFASA)
National Coalition for Asian Pacific American Community Development (National CAPACD)
National Council of Asian Pacific Americans (NCAPA)
National Network for Arab American Communities
Presente.org
South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT)
Systems for Human Empowerment
Take On Hate
The Arab American Family Support Center
The Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago
The Dream Defenders
The Gathering for Justice
The Markaz
UltraViolet
Veterans Challenge Islamophobia
Veterans For Peace National