

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 5, 2025

The Honorable Bryan Bedford
Administrator
Federal Aviation Administration
800 Independence Ave, SW
Washington, DC 20591

Dear Administrator Bedford:

On July 26, 2025, we witnessed the latest in a series of emergency aircraft evacuations when a fire on an American Airlines 737 MAX 8 on a Denver runway required 173 passengers and 6 crew members to exit the aircraft using slides.¹ Video showed passengers exiting with carry-on bags and, according to at least one passenger, the process took 10 to 15 minutes—the latter estimate exceeding FAA’s 90 second evacuation standard by 10 times.

This incident followed an evacuation of a Delta A330 on an Orlando tarmac on April 21, 2025, due to an engine fire², and an even more harrowing March 13, 2025, evacuation of an American Airlines 737-800 in Denver, where passengers were forced to stand on a wing, enveloped in hazardous smoke, to escape a fire. As one passenger later stated, “Smoke started to fill the cabin, and people started screaming and pushing and jumping and yelling.”³ Fortunately, for all three incidents, professional and highly trained flight crews were able to guide all passengers to safety with minimal injuries.

While FAA has yet to disclose how long any of the referenced passenger evacuations took, these incidents once again raise serious questions about FAA’s 90 second evacuation standard as well as FAA’s assumptions about how evacuations occur in real world conditions (such as the assumption every passenger will comply with instructions to deplane without carry-on bags).

Section 365 of the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 requires FAA to examine evacuation standards to ensure they consider realistic circumstances including the presence of carry-on bags. It also requires FAA to account for the challenges posed by evacuating a representative sample of passengers, which often include seniors, children and individuals with disabilities—including passengers who require wheelchairs or other mobility assistive devices.

Congress had good reason to require FAA to carefully examine its evacuation standards given the agency’s recent track record. In 2020, a U.S. Department of Transportation Office of

¹ Dalla Fahled & Jordan Brown, “Passengers evacuated from plane onto Denver runway after landing gear issue sparked fire and left 1 injured,” *CNN*, July 27, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.cnn.com/2025/07/26/us/denver-airport-evacuate-landing-gear>

² Pete Muntean, “Passengers evacuate on Orlando tarmac after engine fire,” *CNN*, April 21, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.cnn.com/2025/04/21/travel/passengers-evacuate-on-orlando-tarmac-after-engine-fire>

³ Pete Muntean, Alexandra Skores, Amanda Musa, Amanda Jackson, Lex Harvey, Nic F. Anderson, “Passengers evacuate onto wing of American Airlines plane after engine catches fire at Denver airport,” *CNN*, March 14, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.cnn.com/2025/03/13/us/american-airlines-fire-denver-airport>

Inspector General report, *FAA's Process for Updating Its Aircraft Evacuation Standards Lacks Data Collection and Analysis on Current Evacuation Risks*, concluded:

“FAA largely updates evacuation standards only after accidents and it conducted its last update based on an accident in 1991. FAA also has **not conducted sufficient research on passenger behaviors**—such as evacuations with carry-on bags and the presence of emotional support animals—and seat dimensions to show how they affect evacuation standards [emphasis added].”⁴

Further, when Congress acted in 2018 to require FAA determine a minimum seat size and space for safety, FAA commissioned an unrealistic in-person simulation at its Civil Aerospace Medical Institute (CAMI) consisting of only able-bodied individuals under age 60. The National Academies conducted a peer review of FAA’s work and criticized a key CAMI finding:

“...the key conclusion in CAMI’s report that current airplane seating configurations should not impede the evacuation of 99% of the general U.S. population **is not supported by the design and results of the research project** [emphasis added].”⁵

As Congress continues oversight of FAA’s evacuation standards, I request FAA provide detailed responses to the following by August 12, 2025:

- For each evacuation (July 26, 2025, April 21, 2025 and March 13, 2025):
 1. How long did it take to evacuate all passengers and crew (provide exact times)?
 2. How many passengers exited with carry-on bags?
 3. How many passengers were children?
 4. How many passengers were seniors?
 5. How many passengers were individuals with disabilities? Please include a detailed breakdown of the types of mobility issues, specific assistive technology or medical devices that such individuals were able to evacuate with or were forced to leave behind.
- A status update on FAA’s implementation of Section 365 of the FAA Reauthorization Act. Please include a copy of FAA’s study on improvements to evacuation standards that the law required FAA conduct by May 16, 2025.

⁴ “FAA’s Process for Updating Its Aircraft Evacuation Standards Lacks Data Collection and Analysis on Current Evacuation Risks,” U.S. Department of Transportation Office of the Inspector General (OIG DOT), Report No. AV2020045, September 16, 2020, p. 2, accessed here: https://www.oig.dot.gov/sites/default/files/library-items/16_FAA%20Oversight%20of%20Aircraft%20Evacuations%20Final%20Report_R.pdf

⁵ “Peer Review of the Federal Aviation Administration’s Study of the Effects of Passenger Seat Width and Pitch on Airplane Evacuation Performance,” National Academies Press, June 2025, p. 3, accessed here: <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/catalog/29070/peer-review-of-the-federal-aviation-administrations-study-of-the-effects-of-passenger-seat-width-and-pitch-on-airplane-evacuation-performance>

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Tammy Duckworth". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Tammy" and last name "Duckworth" clearly distinguishable.

Tammy Duckworth

Ranking Member

Subcommittee on Aviation,

Space and Innovation

Senate Committee on

Commerce, Science and

Transportation