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**“CLOSE CALLS: IMPROVING SAFETY ACROSS THE NATIONAL AIRSPACE SYSTEM”
STATEMENT OF CHRISTOPHER T. SUNUNU, PRESIDENT AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE
OFFICER (CEO), AIRLINES FOR AMERICA
BEFORE THE
U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON AVIATION, SPACE, AND INNOVATION**

June 23, 2026

Good afternoon, Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Duckworth and members of the Subcommittee. My name is Chris Sununu, and I am the President and CEO of Airlines for America (A4A). Thank you for inviting me here today, and on behalf of all our A4A members¹, I appreciate the opportunity to participate in the Subcommittee’s examination of recent near misses and the continued work we can all do to further strengthen the safest aviation system in the world.

Remembrance and Vigilance. I would be remiss not to take a moment to honor the lives of those lost and those affected in recent accidents and to thank all of the first responders who risk their lives reacting to these events. Safety is so interwoven in every facet of our operations and culture that when these rare moments of tragedy occur, they are somber reminders that aviation safety demands constant vigilance. Our thoughts are with those lost and the families left behind.

Our industry is not defined by our response to tragedy alone, but by its commitment to learn from every incident, report and piece of safety data. Recent events such as the fatal runway collision at LaGuardia (March 2026) and a string of near misses at John F. Kennedy International Airport (May 2026), Newark Liberty International Airport (March 2026), Nashville International Airport (April 2026), along with multiple commercial crew reports of helicopter conflicts underscores that safety is not static, and it requires constant watchfulness, investment and continued evolution.

In many cases these incidents are not the result of a single failure, but they reflect system complexity, with multiple layers of people, procedures and technology that must work together flawlessly. In several instances the multiple safety layers worked exactly as designed, onboard collision avoidance systems issued alerts, and pilots responded decisively to avoid tragedy. However, the system performing as intended should not be confused with a system beyond improvement. Our industry recognizes a clear obligation to identify root causes and conduct rigorous, forensic reviews that strengthen resilience. Every incident, regardless of its complexity, is an opportunity—and a responsibility—to learn. When any layer exhibits signs of stress, whether localized or systemic, it demands a deliberate and appropriate response. We must methodically strengthen the system, capturing every insight to ensure we are not just responding to incidents but preventing them entirely.

Commercial Aviation Safety Commitment and Framework. U.S. commercial aviation remains extraordinarily safe, and that record was built through decades of disciplined collaboration among airlines, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), manufacturers, airports, pilots, flight attendants, mechanics, dispatchers and air traffic controllers. As noted above, the system is safer today because the aviation community does not wait for accidents to reveal risk. Instead, our industry uses data-driven, non-punitive and highly collaborative safety programs to identify precursors and implement mitigations before harm

¹ A4A is the trade association for the leading U.S. airlines, both passenger and cargo carriers. Members of the association are Alaska Airlines; American Airlines; Atlas Air; Delta Air Lines; FedEx; JetBlue Airways; Southwest Airlines; United Airlines; and UPS. Air Canada is an associate member.



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occurs. Central to this approach are air carrier Safety Management Systems (SMS), which institutionalize proactive hazard identification, risk assessment and continuous improvement across operations.

SMS provide a structured, organization-wide framework for managing safety risk through clearly defined policies, formal safety assurance processes and a strong safety culture. By integrating data from voluntary reporting programs, operational performance metrics and safety analyses, SMS enables air carriers to prioritize resources, address emerging risks before they escalate and continuously monitor the effectiveness of mitigations.

That work is supported by programs such as the U.S. Aviation Safety Team (USAST) which includes the Commercial Aviation Safety Team (CAST), Aviation Safety Information Analysis and Sharing (ASIAS), the Aviation Safety Action Program (ASAP), and Flight Operational Quality Assurance (FOQA). These programs, together with broader SMS, help airlines to proactively identify and reduce risk.

Addressing Close Calls. Near misses and close calls pose challenges both in the air and on the airport surface. Pragmatic adoption of new technology will play a key role in improving our system both in the air and on the ground.

In flight, air carriers operate with established collision-avoidance systems that are independent of ground-based air traffic control. The Airborne Collision Avoidance System (ACAS) is a set of onboard safety systems that includes Traffic Collision Avoidance System (TCAS) II and newer ACAS X variants that are designed to reduce the likelihood of midair collisions by providing traffic advisories and, when needed, resolution advisories that direct pilots to maintain or increase separation. These capabilities are a core safety component for air carriers.

Additional tools under discussion across the aviation community, including broader use of Automatic Dependent Surveillance – Broadcast In (ADS-B In) and related cockpit traffic-display capabilities, may further enhance situational awareness in certain operating environments. However, these technologies should be evaluated carefully with attention to certification requirements, integration with existing avionics and supply chain challenges, among others.

It is important to note that not all aircraft fleet models are the same, and the ability for air carriers to utilize these technologies in the future is heavily dependent on factors outside the control of the air carrier, in particular, access to an FAA-certified solution. While these tools hold promise, there must be an appropriate amount of time to allow equipment to be designed, manufactured and installed in a normal maintenance cycle. A4A looks forward to continued work with the Committee on these solutions that can improve safety for all system users.

On the airport surface, FAA has deployed or is expanding tools such as Airport Surface Detection Equipment, Model X (ASDE-X), Airport Surface Surveillance Capability (ASSC), the Surface Awareness Initiative, and Runway Incursion Devices to improve controller awareness and reduce runway incursion risk. In the wake of the LGA accident, the FAA has also increased focus on the use of vehicle movement area transmitters and runway warning systems to improve airfield safety. These investments are important for improved timely surveillance, clear communication, and situational awareness for both controllers and vehicle operators. A4A supports these efforts.

Recommendations. Congress can play a critical role in reducing risk by supporting the people, infrastructure and operational stability that the National Airspace System (NAS) requires. While indirect to the specific incidents, Congress can provide predictability and stability through strategic investment for the foundational components necessary to not only maintain our system but also grow and improve the



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operational capabilities of the NAS while also improving safety through risk mitigation and durability. Specifically –

- Air Traffic Controller Staffing. Continued attention to air traffic controller staffing and training is essential. FAA's 2026–2028 Air Traffic Controller Workforce Plan underscores the importance of sustaining hiring, training and retention to rebuild staffing levels over time. A modern, resilient safety system requires enough certified controllers, enough instructors and enough training capacity to support the system safely and efficiently.
- Build the Brand New Air Traffic Control System (BNATCS). A4A, as part of an unprecedented, industry-wide “Modern Skies Coalition” strongly supported Congress’s \$12.5 billion downpayment toward air traffic control modernization, and we continue to advocate in support of additional funding of at least \$19 billion to completely build a new air traffic control system.
- Appropriations Regular Order. It is extremely important that Congress avoids disruption and prioritizes returning to regular order in the annual appropriations process, particularly when it comes to the funding for the FAA and the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) which provide monopoly services to the traveling public and aviation industry.
- Ensure the Traveling Public Is Not Harmed by Another Government Shutdown. Short of regaining regular order in the appropriations process, in any future shutdown instance, institute a governance and funding system that will provide stable and predictable funding to avoid future shutdown impacts on the traveling public. Travelers have paid for these services, and they should not be impacted by governmental policy differences that are unrelated to the operation of the aviation system.

A4A is grateful for the work that has been done on controller staffing and ATC modernization but emphasizes near-term gains should not overshadow the long-term commitment and hard work necessary to fulfill the vision of a modernized ATC system.

Conclusion. A4A appreciates the Committee’s sustained attention to aviation safety and focus on measures to produce meaningful safety gains across the entire system. The U.S. has built a commercial aviation safety record that is second to none, and that record has evolved through decades of collaboration across the entire aviation ecosystem. Airlines do not compete on safety. Instead, we share information, we learn from mistakes and close calls and we work continuously to strengthen every layer of protection in the system. We welcome these discussions.

Let me end with a clear and unequivocal point: The U.S. aviation system remains the safest in the world. Congress can, and should, optimize our safety capabilities through dedicated and sustained commitment to both the foundational workforce and technology components of the system. While risk can never be entirely eliminated, a stable, well-resourced system enables us to continuously reduce and manage risk across the system—strengthening safety for all users and the traveling public.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.