

Legislative Hearing on the Domestic Partnership Benefits and Obligations Act of 2009

Statement of Carolyn E. Wright
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before the

Subcommittee on Federal Workforce, Postal Service, and the District of Columbia
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform

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Chairman Lynch, Members of the Subcommittee, my name is Carol Wright and I am Vice President of Corporate Human Resources for American Airlines, based in Fort Worth, Texas.

As requested, I have submitted my testimony for the record, and will keep my remarks brief.

Speaking for the more than 80,000 employees of American Airlines and our partners at American Eagle, we are honored to be here today and to address relevant issues in your consideration of Representative Tammy Baldwin's legislation, H.R. 2517, The Domestic Partnership Benefits and Obligations Act of 2009.

As you can appreciate, we are by no means experts on the federal workforce, or the specific human resource and benefits equity questions you are raising with this legislation. We have not had the opportunity to study it in detail nor do I believe we can competently offer recommendations on all aspects of the bill.

Instead, you have encouraged us to share with you our experience as a corporate leader in the private sector and to share our views on best employment practices and inclusion – which speak to the overall goals of this legislation.

First, let me provide just a brief overview of our company. American, American Eagle, and the AmericanConnections® airlines serve 250 cities in 40 countries with, on average, more than 3,400 daily flights. Our combined network fleet totals approximately 900 aircraft. American Airlines is also a founding member of the global oneworld® Alliance, and together with oneworld members, we serve nearly 700 destinations in over 150 countries, with 8,500 daily departures. We also transport approximately 500,000 tons of cargo around the world each day.

At a glance, those statistics highlight our mission for the past 75 years. American recognizes that being a global airline means we are in the business of connecting people and cultures from around the world. Our company will only be successful if the experience we deliver, and the environment we create, is safe, welcoming and respectful of everyone. American also recognizes the relationships among its customers, employees, business partners and suppliers,

and the communities that we serve. We must embrace the diversity that exists within each of our key constituencies, and operate in an inclusive manner, for all of these groups to thrive.

As a company that bears the name “American,” we also know that much is expected of us, and we hold ourselves to a high standard. From hiring the industry’s first African-American flight attendant in 1963, to the first female pilot in 1973, to the creation of our supplier diversity program in the 1980s and our multicultural sales teams in the 1990s, American has a long history of leadership. We also know that promoting diversity is a journey, and American is committed to making further progress as we weave it into the very fabric of our company.

Beginning in 1993, we were the first major airline to include sexual orientation in our Equal Employment Opportunity policy and we added gender identity in 1999. In 1994, we also recognized our lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender employees as our first official Employee Resource Group. Last month, we celebrated their 15th anniversary.

We saw first-hand how these inclusive steps translated into enhanced loyalty and morale among our people, and gave evidence throughout the company that our words and our actions were aligned. In fact, last September, American wrote a letter to Congress supporting passage of the proposed Employment Non-Discrimination Act – which mirrors our own inclusive recruitment, hiring and retention practices.

Building on these first steps, in the late 1990’s, we decided to examine benefits parity for all of our employees, and to identify any gaps in our soft and hard benefits, including health and other insurance coverage, travel companion privileges, and other options that customarily were available to legally married heterosexual spouses.

Philosophically, we have always tried to recognize employees as individuals with their own families’ needs, talents and ambitions. All deserve equal respect and acceptance for the true worth and unique experiences and skills they bring to their jobs. We determined that treating employees in committed relationships with same-sex partners as a family, rather than as single people, was consistent with that philosophy. So, in 2000, we became the first major airline to offer benefits to the same-sex partners of our employees as we had long done for married spouses.

I am not able to disclose proprietary financial details about the costs or fiscal implications of our policies, but I can readily report that the actual impact on overall human resource budgets is proportionally modest and manageable.

What are the upsides? In the past decade, we see a stronger workforce in every sense. We are instilling a more enduring sense of loyalty and commitment, and helping to motivate our LGBT employees to be all they can be and to bring their whole identity to work. We never saw this as a special case or privilege, but simply doing the right thing in a business setting that underscores fairness, equity and inclusion.

In our diverse segment marketing strategies, we now can tell a more complete story to all customers about our welcome that is authentic and meaningful. There is no question that it helps

us to be a much stronger contender as a world-class marketing organization during this very difficult economy. We know all of our customers consider service, value, convenience and comfort. However, in a very competitive market, we have learned that many appreciate inclusion and equal respect, too.

What are the implications for the federal government and your extraordinarily diverse workforce – which dwarfs so many corporations? We cannot safely predict with any certainty the future market conditions for employment and worker retention. But we can report that America’s top corporations are showing the way on best practices. According to research from the Human Rights Campaign, roughly 80% of the Fortune 100 now offers equal, same-sex partner benefits, and the same can be said of 57% of the Fortune 500.

Last year, in a national survey commissioned by Out & Equal Workplace Advocates, and conducted by Harris Interactive with Witeck-Combs Communications, 64% of all American adults agreed that job benefits should be extended equally to committed same-sex partners that are available to legally married spouses.

Mr. Chairman, in closing, I also have a recently-updated document titled “Diversity and Inclusion—A Way of Life at American Airlines” that I would like to submit for the official record.

Again, thank you for inviting American Airlines to be here today, and to report on our past decade experience on this topic. We continue to work hard to sustain and build our commitment to diversity leadership, and hope our testimony reflects some of the lessons we have learned and are proud to share with you.

Thank you and I will be happy to respond to any questions.