United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 2, 2017

Mr. Gary C. Kelly
CEO
Southwest Airlines Co.
2702 Love Field Drive
Dallas, TX 75235

Dear Mr. Kelly:

We are writing in support of fair wages and benefits for the thousands of airline workers across the country and to urge Southwest Airlines to lead among its peers and work with relevant airports to support living wages, meaningful benefits, and basic protections for its subcontracted workforce.

The airline industry has increasingly outsourced the functions of its on-ground airport service workers, subcontracting essential roles like baggage handlers, skycap, cabin cleaners, and wheelchair attendants to achieve cost savings and further pad profits. While companies insist on strict adherence to company policy by its subcontracted workforce as it relates to employees activities and procedures, these same requirements too rarely extend to worker protection measures. Shielded from industry labor standards and oversight, wages in these positions have fallen dramatically: average weekly wages in airport operations jobs, excluding air traffic control, decreased in real terms by 14 percent from 1991 to 2011. [1] Today, even the highest-paid outsourced workers earn less in real terms than the average directly-employed worker holding the same job a decade ago.[2] All told, more than 50 percent of workers rely on some type of public assistance, despite many working more than 40 hours per week.

While several airports across the country have guaranteed for its workers living wages and meaningful benefits, the subcontracted workers at several airports, including Newark Liberty International Airport and Cleveland Hopkins International Airport, go without basic workplace protections. The problems extend beyond poverty-level wages and wage theft, and into unsafe working conditions. The Occupational Safety Hazard Administration has repeatedly cited subcontractors at Newark Liberty International Airport for serious violations relating to unsafe equipment, inadequate worker training, and exposure to potentially infectious materials—negligence that puts workers at significant physical risk and with little recourse. [3][4]

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[1] Dietz, Miranda, Peter Hall, and Ken Jacobs. "Course Correction: Reversing Wage Erosion to Restore Good Jobs at American Airports" Economic and Political Weekly 37.11 (2013): n. pag. Oct. 2013. Web. Apr. 2017.
[2] Ibid
[3] Newman, David M., Charlene Obernauer, and Tony Straka. "Airport Safety Starts with Safer Working Conditions." (2014): n. pag. New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health. New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health. Web. 2 May 2017.
[4] United States. Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Parsippany Area Office, Region 2. Occupational Safety and Health Administration Case Inspection Nos. 1184145 and 1092584 Re: Primeflight Aviation Services. OSHA, n.d. Web. 2 May 2017.

We request your attention to these issues, and ask that you provide us with information regarding your subcontracted workforce, including the number of subcontractors; the type of work that is being contracted out and whether that work had previously been done in-house; the typical length of a contract; terms provided to subcontractors regarding wages, paid sick and leave time, safety training, security clearances, and general working conditions; and guidance provided to subcontractors regarding expected fidelity to company conduct and procedures.

Southwest Airlines has a remarkable opportunity to improve the economic conditions of thousands of men and women who every day work tirelessly in support of the airline and its passengers. In the process, you have an opportunity to set a new standard for the airline industry when it comes to the fair treatment of subcontracted workers. We look to you for leadership in demanding these important reforms.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Cory A. Booker
United States Senator

Sherrod Brown
United States Senator