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FAA Blasted Over Voluntary Safety Plan

Relatives of Buffalo Crash Victims Wary of Agency's Effort for Change

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The Federal Aviation Administration's call for voluntary measures to counter safety lapses at regional airlines is drawing criticism from family members of victims who died in the Feb. 12 crash of a commuter plane outside Buffalo.

Transportation Secretary [Ray LaHood](#) and newly installed FAA administrator Randy Babbitt said yesterday that they would bring together representatives of airlines, labor unions and other industry groups for closed-door meetings on Monday to review flight safety at regional airlines. The department is seeking voluntary action from participants to improve safety, though no specific proposals have been made.

Relatives of crash victims said yesterday that they were wary of the plan.

"We applaud any progress that is being made and any attention that is given to this critical issue," said Ken Mellett, whose 34-year-old son, jazz musician Coleman T. Mellett, died on the flight. "However, if you are talking about something that's voluntary, then it's insufficient from my perspective."

Last month, the National Transportation Safety Board held a three-day public hearing into the crash, in which 50 people died as the plane approached Buffalo Niagara International Airport. Tickets on the Newark-to-Buffalo flight were sold by Continental Airlines, but the plane was operated by a contractor, Manassas-based Colgan Air, a unit of Pinnacle Airlines.

The safety board criticized business and safety practices of regional airlines, including low pay for pilots, questionable training practices, pilot exam failures and problems related to crew rest. The NTSB's investigation is ongoing. The agency has yet to outline its findings in the case.

Laura Brown, an FAA spokeswoman, said the call for voluntary action didn't rule out future rulemaking actions by the agency. "This is a first step to see if there are things that we can do quickly to raise the safety bar," she said.

Kevin Kuwik, who lost his girlfriend, Lorin Maurer, 30, on the flight, said that even though he was encouraged after meeting Babbitt last month, he and family members would pursue congressional action to force safety improvements.

"We're not putting all our efforts into voluntary action -- nothing really comes of that," Kuwik said. "Let's be honest, the regional carriers exist to fill a low-cost niche in the industry. In our opinion that's where safety gets sacrificed."

[Sen. Byron L. Dorgan](#) (D-N.D.), chairman of the Senate subcommittee on aviation matters, will hold a hearing today to examine airline safety. Witnesses include Babbitt and Mark V. Rosenker, the acting NTSB chairman. A House transportation panel will hold hearings tomorrow on regional airline piloting.

Justin Green, an attorney for the families of 15 passengers on the Colgan flight, said the government should forcefully move to tighten FAA rules. "If the Colgan accident does not prompt real significant change -- not only at the FAA but also in the industry -- I don't know what will," Green said.

The Colgan crash has been described by the NTSB as the worst U.S. transportation accident in seven years. The FAA yesterday also ordered inspectors to immediately focus on training programs at regional airlines. It wasn't clear how many of the nation's 70 commercial airlines will participate in the summit or whether the assembled group planned to publicly list its findings.

Meanwhile, regional airlines are developing their own safety plan. The Regional Airline Association is finalizing its strategic safety initiative, which would create new programs to combat pilot fatigue, call for limits on plane-hopping by pilots who commute to work, and, among other measures, expand the use of cockpit voice recorders to rein in excessive conversation between pilots.