

United Airlines' New Policy for Shipping Pets

The Policy

United Airlines has adopted a new policy for shipping your pet home or onward to a new assignment. Previously a pet could go in the cabin with you if it met the small pet guidelines or it was a service animal. Otherwise if the pet traveled on the same plane with you it could go in the plane as excess or unaccompanied baggage and be checked in and picked up at the baggage counter. It would go through customs the same as your luggage. If the pet did not travel on the same plane it had to then go as cargo, at cargo rates, delivered and picked up at the cargo terminal. Many times this required the expense of a pet handler service. Also going as cargo the pet had to go through the cargo customs process which sometimes took as long as 20 hours and have resulted in some pet deaths as cargo terminals in many countries where foreign service families are assigned are not equipped to handle live animals.

United has merged with Continental Airlines and has adopted their "Pet Safe" program. This means that all pets which do not meet the "in cabin" requirements must be shipped as cargo with all the resulting dangers and expenses. In some cases cost rise from several hundred to several thousand dollars not counting the time lost in getting the pet to and out of cargo terminals and most importantly the danger to the pet itself. AAFSW and AFSA feel that while the "Pet Safe" program may work domestically it is not safe internationally.

Within days of announcing this change military personnel who also must "Fly America" when on permanent change of station orders protested and were exempted from some of the onerous requirements. Pets must fly as cargo with cargo rates but may be checked in and picked up at the baggage counters. They are also exempt from having to use pet shippers and that expense.

What AAFSW and AFSA have done

AFSA (the American Foreign Service Association) and AAFSW put out the call via Livelines and FSParent Yahoo groups and AFSA's connections for Foreign Affairs families to e-mail United with the slogan "We Also Serve" and ask for the same exemptions as the military personnel. Within 72 hours almost 3000 e-mails were sent to United. The e-mails and tweets continue. These were met with either robo e-mail returns from United or with stony silence. A further statement in the press by a United spokesperson indicated that United had no intention of exempting anyone but the military from United's new policy.

What State has done

The Under Secretary for Management has been able to get a change in the FAM to allow families with pets who would normally fly United to fly another American carrier or its codeshare which does allow pets to fly as unaccompanied baggage. If there is a difference in cost between United and the other airlines the employee must pay the additional cost. However, sometimes this is less than the price

United would have charged for the pet. As an example, Snoopy the cat was able to fly from Ykatrinberg in Russia on an Aeroflot/Delta codeshare instead of United. Aeroflot charged \$67 for Snoopy.

What AFSA and AAFSW are doing now

Volunteers from AFSA and AAFSW have gone through the 3,000 e-mails to United to pick the most poignant ones and the ones which most concretely state our reasons to be exempted. From the 140 chosen e-mails this will be reduced again to 50. AFSA is composing a letter to be sent to Secretary Hilary Clinton with excerpts from the letters and picture of pets as attachments. This letter or a similar one will be sent to the Board of Directors of United.

The media is beginning to be involved and there have been several articles about the pet policy and how it affects Foreign Affairs families.

Visit the AAFSW Website or the AFSA website for the links to articles about United's "Pet Safe" policy and for the most up-to-date developments.