



U.S. Department
of Transportation

**Federal Aviation
Administration**

Great Lakes Region
2300 East Devon Avenue
Des Plaines, IL 60018

November 8, 2016

The Honorable Tammy Duckworth
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congresswoman Duckworth:

Thank you for your October 5 letter, cosigned by your colleagues, regarding low flying aircraft on approach to O'Hare International Airport. I appreciate the opportunity to address your concerns.

Your letter stated area residents believe they observe aircraft flying lower than the standard glide path. You requested the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) address how it monitors the altitude of O'Hare traffic and what it does to enforce any violations to regulations. Lastly, you requested data detailing any violations of minimum required altitudes for air carriers operating at O'Hare within the last five years.

FAA Air Traffic Controllers monitor every phase of flight for all operations in and out of O'Hare. The Chicago Terminal Radar Approach Control (TRACON) monitors flights and communicates with pilots using O'Hare from approximately 40 miles away from O'Hare, and hands off aircraft for their final descent and landing to the O'Hare Airport Traffic Control Towers (ATCTs). Communications between pilots and controllers include frequent verification of location and altitude, as well as instructions on waypoints to fly and which runway to use. Additionally, controllers verify the information they have on radar displays with each pilot, again to ensure safety of operations. FAA radar systems include an alarm if an aircraft descends below the minimum safe altitude. The controller is required to inform the pilot of these warnings. Similarly, aircraft are equipped with avionics that also alarm to warn pilots if an aircraft is below a minimum safe altitude.

The warnings are captured in the Air Traffic Quality Assurance Database (ATQA) for follow up. FAA's Aviation Safety organization (AVS) reviews the information in the database and follows up with action against the flight crew if a deviation is substantiated. This could involve either administrative or legal enforcement action, depending on the nature or severity of any infraction.

Airline flights approaching O'Hare Airport are without exception operating under Instrument Flight Rules (IFR) regardless of the weather. Such flights follow Standard Terminal Arrival Routes (STARs) which consist of specific radar vectors of heading and altitude as assigned by Air Traffic Control (ATC), or they are given specific altitude and heading instructions by ATC to avoid aircraft or weather, all while under direct Air Traffic Control. Altitudes on such approaches well exceed the minimum safe altitudes which are defined in 14 C.F.R. Part 91.

A flight may be cleared by ATC for a "visual approach" only when Visual Flight Rules weather exists and the airport or the traffic they are following are in sight, but not before that point.

Prior to clearance the aircraft would still be on a heading and altitude assigned by Air Traffic. On a visual approach, the pilot will maintain assigned altitude until cleared, and then would normally be at or above the glide path of the instrument landing system to reduce the risk of loss of control which could be caused by the wake turbulence of preceding aircraft. Once an aircraft on approach intersects the glide slope, descending below the glide slope does not result in a quicker arrival, only a greater chance of upset, something all airline pilots are trained to avoid and greatly respect.

In reviewing the information in ATQA, which is kept for 24 months, we did not find any deviation that triggered an investigation with respect to an air carrier pilot descending below an assigned altitude on approach to O'Hare. Based on our experience, we know that few, if any, air carrier pilots are involved in enforcement actions with respect to violating the requirement to fly at safe altitudes as defined by regulations. We can continue to search our legal enforcement records, which are administered and maintained separately from the ATQA database, to search an additional three years of records. These records cannot be searched as readily as the ATQA database, and will require additional search time on our part. Please advise if you would like us to perform that additional search.

As part of normal flight operations, all aircraft approaching to land on O'Hare runways are flying an approach descent profile according to a well-defined and monitored glide path. This glide path ensures safe clearance of obstacles and maintains the aircraft in the proper airspace. The FAA's primary mission is to ensure the safety of the public, and that is not exclusive to the flying public, but also to everyone exposed to aircraft operations. Citizens concerned with abnormally low operations, are encouraged to report the observation with identifying information, such as air carrier, aircraft type (if known), time of day, the location, and if possible the aircraft registration or "N" number, to the Chicago O'Hare Flight Standards District Office (FSDO) for investigation. The Chicago O'Hare FSDO can be reached at 847-294-7900. Additionally, as a resource, citizens can track flight activity into and out of Chicago O'Hare International Airport and Chicago Midway International Airport, along with information about each aircraft at <http://webtrak5.bksv.com/cda>.

We have sent an identical response to each of the cosigners of your letter.

We hope this overall explanation of air carrier operations at O'Hare has addressed your concerns. If I can be of further assistance, please contact me at 847-294-7294.

Sincerely,



Barry D. Cooper
Regional Administrator
Great Lakes Region



U.S. Department
of Transportation
**Federal Aviation
Administration**

Great Lakes Region
2300 East Devon Avenue
Des Plaines, IL 60018

November 8, 2016

The Honorable Mike Quigley
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Quigley:

Thank you for your October 5 letter, cosigned by your colleagues, regarding low flying aircraft on approach to O'Hare International Airport. I appreciate the opportunity to address your concerns.

Your letter stated area residents believe they observe aircraft flying lower than the standard glide path. You requested the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) address how it monitors the altitude of O'Hare traffic and what it does to enforce any violations to regulations. Lastly, you requested data detailing any violations of minimum required altitudes for air carriers operating at O'Hare within the last five years.

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Barry D. Cooper
Regional Administrator
Great Lakes Region



U.S. Department
of Transportation
**Federal Aviation
Administration**

Great Lakes Region
2300 East Devon Avenue
Des Plaines, IL 60018

November 8, 2016

The Honorable Janice Schakowsky
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congresswoman Schakowsky:

Thank you for your October 5 letter, cosigned by your colleagues, regarding low flying aircraft on approach to O'Hare International Airport. I appreciate the opportunity to address your concerns.

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