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Teamsters Local 726 Members Save Woman from Running into Live Airport Runway

O’Hare Airport Motor Truck Drivers Prevent Mentally Challenged Woman from Injuring Self and Others

Teamster Chris Traylor was being trained to operate an airside sweeper on O’Hare International Airport’s bravo pad, when something out of the corner of his eye caught

his attention—a tractor with two baggage carts was headed full speed toward a runway.



From left to right: Teamsters Local 726 Motor Truck Drivers Larry Ostberg, Chris Traylor and David Almaguer.

Ordinarily, seeing an airport worker driving a luggage tractor is not an uncommon occurrence, but something about this situation was wrong. The vehicle was swerving and approaching a live runway. He also noticed the woman driving the tractor was not an airport employee and was not wearing an authorized badge.

Suddenly the woman buried the tractor in the grass.

Immediately Chris and his coworker, David Almaguer, ran after the woman. When they

caught up with her, they started talking to her and noticed that she was in extreme need of assistance.

She suddenly broke away from them and took off running toward the live runway. They chased her and pulled her away from the open runway to safety.

Seconds later, Larry Ostberg arrived at the scene in response to Almaguer’s emergency call, and found the woman seated in the grass and his two coworkers surrounding her to make sure she didn’t bolt.

“Just by talking to her, you could tell she was incoherent and frightened. She didn’t know where she was or how she got on the runway,” said Ostberg. “The least we could do was get her off the runway and to the authorities to handle the situation.”

Since it was pouring down rain, Ostberg offered the woman to sit in the back seat of his city vehicle. Ostberg sat in the front seat and questioned her calmly until security guards and police officers arrived.

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The three men are motor truck drivers, who are certified by the FAA to talk to the air traffic tower. They are part of an airfield driving staff of 100 Teamsters who work in three different shifts. The wide range of job duties includes snow and debris removal, chasing animals off the runways, responding to calls from the tower and escorting contractors and VIPs safely off the runway.

“It was very fortunate that we spotted the woman on the field and that we rescued her to safety,” said Almaguer. “With almost 2,800 landings per day and planes landing every 14 seconds, the situation could have cost a lot of lives if she crossed the runway during a plane takeoff or landing.”

In recognition of their efforts for turning in the woman for illegally entering the airfield, the three men each received a \$50 cash award from Crime Stoppers. Crime Stoppers is a community service awards program that combines the police, media and the public in crime solving efforts in Cook County.

“Our drivers handled the situation outstandingly—it’s the same professional performance we expect from the caliber of Teamsters who work here,” said Robert Hanrahan, General Foreman of the O’Hare motor truck drivers.

Such a situation is not a common occurrence at O’Hare International Airport, but it is an example of how airport workers experience many different challenges.

“You just never know what is going to happen,” said Trailer. “You have to think fast and be quick on your feet, because a split second can make a huge difference.”

O’Hare International Airport is located in Chicago, and is the second largest hub in America, with more than 190,000 travelers passing through O’Hare’s gates every day. The airport covers approximately 7,800 acres.

“The airport motor truck drivers are hardly ever seen by passengers, but we see millions of passengers,” said Almaguer, who has been a member of Teamsters Local 726 for the 15 years he has worked at O’Hare.

When Air Force One flies in to O’Hare, two drivers escort Secret Service Agents down the runway before the plane lands. They inspect the runway for any bombs or debris before the plane can land. Once Air Force One lands, the drivers go back to the runway and clean up any debris.

“After Air Force One lands in our airport, the last person to leave the runway is a Teamster,” said Hanrahan.

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More than 200 pieces of snow equipment are used to clear the O'Hare runways and taxiways.

The drivers' jobs impact everyone, from air traffic controllers to the passengers. One of the biggest jobs that affects the flights is the snow removal process.

The drivers operate more than 200 pieces of snow equipment to clear the runways and taxiways. The drivers clear off the runways with million-dollar plows and blowers in five to seven minutes. And no matter how much it snows, they always have at least one or two runways open at all times.

Two types of plows, the \$1.1 million Bashong and the \$850,000 Vammass, clear runways at speeds of 25 to 30 miles per hour.

“Our jobs keep the airport from losing millions of dollars,” said Almaguer. “If we didn't get those runways cleared as quickly as we do in heavy snowstorms, the airport would be forced to shut down temporarily. It would lose money canceling thousands of flights and putting up passengers in hotel rooms.”

The drivers also maintain and operate deicer trucks. They pour deicing fluid on the runways instead of salt, since salt tears up the runways. Sand is hauled in large sand trucks to assist a plane that gets stuck on the runway.

The drivers receive compliments from pilots who are flying in from another airport during bad weather. They fly in, expecting the runways to be much worse because of the weather conditions. They are always amazed that the runways are so clean.

The enthusiasm shared by the motor truck drivers shows how proud they are of their work and proud to be Teamsters.

“There is a great sense of family and camaraderie with the Teamsters,” said Almaguer.