

Morning Mix

An 'emotional support' pit bull mauled a 5-year-old girl in an airport terminal, lawsuit says

By Meagan Flynn

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Mirna Gonzalez had just stepped away from Gate C7 at Portland International Airport when she heard the screaming.

She had only left for a moment to buy a coffee, while she and her children waited for an Alaska Airlines flight to Texas just before Christmas, on Dec. 18, 2017. Her 5-year-old daughter, Gabriella, was supposed to be sitting at the gate with her older brother.

But when Gonzalez returned, Gabriella's face was covered in blood.

While her mother was away, Gabriella asked if she could pet a dog, a pit bull. It was allegedly an emotional support animal.

As soon as she reached out her hand, it bit her in the face.

That's all according to a \$1.1 million [lawsuit](#) Gonzalez filed on behalf of her daughter this week against the dog's owner, Alaska Airlines and the municipal agency Port of Portland, accusing them of negligence since the dog was allowed through the airport without being in a crate. The traumatic incident for the young girl is just one of numerous high-profile allegations of bad support-animal behavior at airports as airlines and the federal government have scrambled to respond to a growing pile of complaints, ranging from poor potty training to nasty bites.

The episodes have proliferated over the past two years, fueling a debate over how the animals should be regulated while traveling. In June 2017, a 70-pound emotional support dog [bit a man in the face](#) just as he sat down in his window seat on a Delta Air Lines flight departing Atlanta, leaving him with 28 stitches. In February 2018, another emotional support dog [chomped](#) at a little girl's forehead on a Southwest Airlines flight departing Phoenix, leaving her with only a scrape but causing panic.

In Gabriella's case, she had to undergo tear-duct surgery, leaving her with permanent scars, her attorney, Chad Stavley, told The Washington Post. The pit bull severed her tear duct and disfigured her upper lip, leaving a chunk of it missing, according to [a graphic photo of her injuries](#) provided by Stavley. A long streak of red leading from the corner of her eye drips down her cheek.

Stavley said he hopes the lawsuit, filed Monday in Multnomah County Circuit Court, will push airports and airlines to strictly enforce the policies surrounding emotional support animals that most created in response to the 2017 and 2018 dog bites. The new rules intend to clamp down on fraudulent emotional support animals or service animals — people’s house pets disguised as helpers — while also making sure the animals that people really need are kept away from other passengers as much as possible.

Stavley said he plans to investigate whether the dog that bit Gabriella was a legitimate emotional support dog. The dog’s owner, Michelle Brannan, claims that it was, according to the lawsuit. She did not immediately respond to a request for comment Wednesday night. It’s unclear if she still owns the dog. According to a December 2017 report from [KATU 2 News](#), the dog was quarantined at an animal shelter for 10 days following the attack, and the owner was cited by police for failing to crate the dog.

“There’s a lot of abuse of this emotional support animal situation,” Stavley said, “and folks who have legitimate service animals — people who are blind and need guide dogs and the like — are kind of getting thrown into the same boat [as emotional support animals]. It shines a poor light on those folks.”

The Port of Portland and Alaska Airlines, which Brannan and the Gonzalez family were flying that day, both declined to comment, citing the pending litigation.

Alaska Airlines was among the airlines that changed their policy on emotional support animals in 2018. The airline’s new rule, which went into effect in October, requires that owners keep their dog or cat — the only animals allowed aboard — in a carrier or on a leash at all times and provide 48-hour notice and appropriate documentation ahead of their flights.

“We are making these changes now based on a number of recent incidents where the inappropriate behavior of emotional support animals has impacted and even injured our employees, other guests and service animals,” Ray Prentice, Alaska Airlines director of customer advocacy, said in an [April 2018 statement](#). “Most animals cause no problems. However, over the last few years, we have observed a steady increase in incidents from animals who haven’t been adequately trained to behave in a busy airport setting or on a plane, which has prompted us to strengthen our policy.”

The support-animal shenanigans — and tragedies — have not been limited to dog bites. One service dog, a golden retriever named Eleanor Rigby, [gave birth](#) to puppies at a terminal in Tampa in June, though people didn’t complain very much about that. In sad news, an emotional-support hamster named Pebbles was [flushed down the toilet](#) by its owner in February 2018 after Spirit Airlines informed the student she could not take the pet with her on the flight from Baltimore. Another man [got angry at United Airlines](#) for denying Dexter, his Instagram-famous emotional-support peacock, a seat on the plane from Newark, even though he had purchased a ticket for the bird.

“We explained this to the customer on three separate occasions before they arrived at the airport,” an airline spokeswoman told The Post then.

When United [announced](#) its policy change in February 2018, the airline said it had witnessed a 75 percent increase in customers bringing emotional support animals aboard. When Delta [announced](#) changes with its policy in January 2018, the airline reported an 84 percent increase “in reported animal incidents” since 2016, including urination and defecation and “acts of aggression” from the animals, “behavior not typically seen in these animals when properly trained and working.”

The concerns from the airlines also prompted the Transportation Department to [review its own rules](#) for service and support animals last year. The agency intended to crack down on the “fraudulent use” of animals who aren’t really service animals and to make sure measures are in place to prevent badly behaved pets from boarding flights. It has yet to issue a final rule change.

In the meantime, Stavley said Gabriella Gonzalez will not be boarding flights anytime soon. The girl developed a fear of airports, he said, as well as a fear of petting dogs.

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