

September 6, 2006 8:59 a.m. EDT

## FAA to Approve New Safety Harness For Toddlers on Airplanes

By ANDY PASZTOR

September 6, 2006 8:59 a.m.

Louise Stoll, a 67-year old grandmother of eight, seems like an unlikely trailblazer to create a new category of child safety-restraints designed for use on aircraft.

But after more than a decade of effort, the former high-ranking Transportation Department official and self-styled inventor has managed to obtain a patent and federal approval for an innovative safety harness intended to protect toddlers when they fly. Instead of the bulky, hard-back car safety seats that can be difficult to secure on airplanes and often weigh as much as 20 pounds, the fold-up harness weighs about one pound and attaches easily to existing seat backs and onboard safety belts.



Slated to be announced Wednesday by the Federal Aviation Administration and the manufacturer of the vest-like harness, leading aircraft seat-belt maker AmSafe Aviation of Phoenix, it's the first alternative safety device approved by the agency to keep children in their seats and protect them from injuries during in-flight turbulence. The harness is intended for use by children from ages of about one to about four -- or weighing between 22 and 44 pounds -- who are too old typically to sit on the laps of adults.

The FAA says the safety harnesses also are safer than normal lap belts on planes, because they fit more snugly around kids and provide more upper-body support. European regulators are working toward joint approval of the first-of-a-kind harness system, to make it easier for families traveling with small children throughout the two regions.

"I am sitting here shaking my head, and thinking that persistence does pay off," Ms. Stoll said in an interview Tuesday from her home in Burlington, Vt. Until her regulatory coup, "all the rules and regulations on the books [of the FAA] made references to what looked like a car seat," she added.



But the emergence of CARES -- which stands for Child Aviation Restraint System -- is more than the remarkable tale of Ms. Stoll's personal gumption and perseverance against enormous odds. It also illustrates the FAA's drive to become more proactive and give parents greater choice when it comes to child safety issues.

"This a big win for the flying public as well as the FAA," according to Bill Hagan, president of AmSafe. "Regulators don't usually lead," he explained. But when the company "decided the standard approaches weren't going to work" because they would take too much time, according to Mr. Hagan, senior FAA officials concluded "this was a worthwhile product" and "went out of their way" to provide broad access to the public.

FAA Administrator Marion Blakey said "we want to provide parents with options so they can make the right decision for their children." Existing safety seats are approved for use both in motor vehicles and aircraft. The harnesses, by contrast, are specially designed and tested for use only in planes and helicopters.

Infamous for its sometimes rigid bureaucracy and frequently ponderous agency rulemaking, this time the FAA took a different, more-nimble approach by granting previously unheard of broad approval for installation of the harness -- now certified for use on everything from corporate aircraft to propeller-driven commuters to the largest commercial jetliners.

Based on the agency's formal action last week, passengers will be permitted to use the harnesses on all U.S. carriers. So far, the airlines have balked at routinely providing them to travelers. Rather, the hardware will be sold on the Web or through other retail channels, with passengers carrying them aboard and installing them at their seats. AMR Corp.'s American Airlines is leaning toward offering the devices for sale at a central location. And Amsafe's Mr. Hagan says his company, the industry's largest supplier of conventional seat belts, will continue to push for wider airline marketing.

When it became clear that airlines were balking at the expense and logistics issues related to directly providing the harnesses to passengers, the FAA's leadership set a new course. Instead of mandating separate certification procedures for individual airlines or each aircraft type, the agency made the highly unusual policy decision to aim for blanket authorization across all carriers.

The harness consists of flexible straps that wrap horizontally around an airline seat, while adjustable vertical straps loop around the both portions of an aircraft's seatbelt to keep children from getting injured during turbulence. Ms. Stoll signed an exclusive licensing deal with AmSafe for the harness, which is expected to sell for about \$75.

The FAA's decision comes more than a year after the agency opted against mandating use of child safety seats on the grounds that such a requirement could force many families to drive instead, thereby subjecting children to greater risk of accidents.

Debate over child restraints on planes has been underway for many years, with the National Transportation Safety Board and many independent safety experts urging mandatory use of child safety seats on airliners.

A former Assistant Secretary of the Department of Transportation who served during President Bill Clinton's Administration, Ms. Stoll said she tried unsuccessfully for years to interest car-seat manufacturers and airlines in the novel device. But she recalled that airline officials "had a lot of operational concerns," such as theft, projecting how many harnesses would have to be stored on planes and even worrying about how to clean the safety devices. Eventually, she said, "the FAA listened and agreed to figure out how to let parents buy it and bring it aboard."