

## US Airways skycaps in Phila. get pink slips

By Linda Loyd

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US Airways plans to replace its skycaps with unionized airline workers at airports across the country when it begins charging \$15 for a first-checked piece of luggage, starting July 9.

Skycaps working for US Airways at Philadelphia International Airport were notified today that their jobs will be eliminated July 31, and that they will receive a \$400 bonus if they stay on the job until then, said skycap Donald Chandler of West Philadelphia, reading a notice that Prime Flight Aviation Services Inc. gave to its skycaps.

"We knew it was coming, but we didn't know it would be this quick," said Chandler, 47, a skycap of nearly 12 years. "As we speak, the guys are starting to scramble and look for jobs. It's the end now."

The skycaps work for Prime Flight, a third-party contractor.

Earlier today, airline spokesman Philip Gee had said that Philadelphia skycaps would keep their jobs "indefinitely."

Chandler said skycaps were handed pink slips when they arrived at work today.

US Airways, which like most airlines has implemented baggage fees to try to recoup losses from record high fuel prices, told its employees, in a newsletter yesterday, that it will close curbside check-in with skycaps at 34 airports. The airline said the transition could take longer at hub cities and large airports.

Starting July 9, US Airways customer-service agents will be curbside to collect \$15 for a first-checked bag - and \$25 for a second checked bag. The \$15 fee applies to passengers who buy tickets after July 9. Because most summer travelers bought their tickets earlier, the impact of new baggage fees is not expected to be felt until early fall.

Longterm, US Airways plans to use self-service kiosks for check-in and payment of baggage fees, both at the curb and inside at ticket counters.

US Airways skycaps, who earn a base salary of \$2.83 an hour here, are plaintiffs in a federal lawsuit over another fee: a \$2-per-bag curbside check-in charge that most airlines implemented in the last year.

Because of that charge, passengers are not tipping skycaps as they used to, either because they think the \$2 charge is a tip or because they are not willing to tip on top of the charge.

Skycaps say their earnings have dropped 50 percent to 75 percent since implementation of the \$2-per-bag fee (\$3 to check a bag at the curb at Delta Air Lines Inc.).

Chandler, who said he used to make \$200 or more a day - most of it in tips - before the \$2 charge, now is lucky to make \$30 a day.

US Airways said its decision to stop using skycaps is not related to the lawsuit regarding skycap tips. Rather, the airline said its union contract with Communications Workers of America specifies that unionized employees must collect funds "in the price range" of the \$15 and \$25 bag fees.

Boston lawyer Shannon Liss-Riordan said today that she has filed a retaliation claim in federal court, alleging US Airways is using the union contract "as a convenient excuse" to get rid of skycaps.

Liss-Riordan and Philadelphia lawyer Mikel Jones filed the federal suit in April in Boston on behalf of 3,000 US Airways skycaps nationwide, trying to recover lost wages and tips. Between 35 and 40 work in Philadelphia.

US Airways skycaps in Boston were notified Thursday that their jobs will be eliminated on July 31. Skycaps at Los Angeles International Airport received a similar notice, Liss-Riordan said.

In April, a federal jury in Boston ordered American Airlines to pay nine skycaps more than \$325,000 for lost tips since the fee was implemented by American in late 2005. The jury found that American violated a Massachusetts law that protects tips received by service workers who are paid below that state's \$8-an-hour minimum wage. Pennsylvania's minimum wage is \$7.15 an hour.

Other lawsuits on behalf of skycaps for United Airlines, JetBlue Airways Corp., and American are pending in federal court in Boston.

US Airways says it will drop the \$2-per-bag curb fee when the \$15-first-bag charge goes into effect July 9.