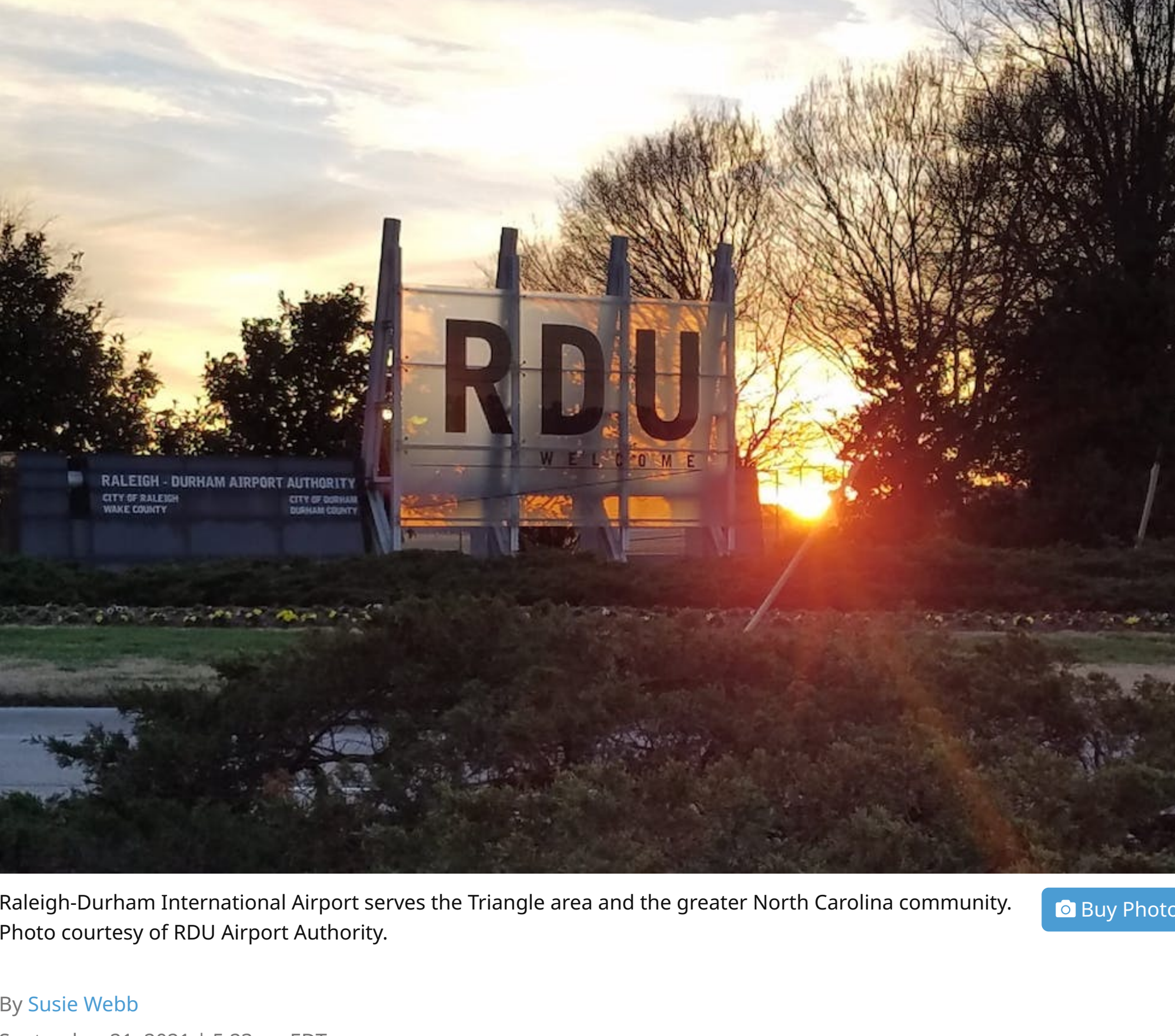


<b>CAROLINA ATHLETICS SPOTLIGHT</b>	<b>WOMEN'S SOCCER</b> vs. <b>Pitt</b> THURSDAY, OCT. 6 @ 7 PM	<b>LIVE ACTION WITH CAROLINA BASKETBALL</b> FRIDAY, OCT. 7 @ 7:30 PM DOORS OPEN AT 6 PM
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## Transgender teen asked to submit to TSA strip search at RDU, according to lawsuit



Raleigh-Durham International Airport serves the Triangle area and the greater North Carolina community. Photo courtesy of RDU Airport Authority.

By Susie Webb  
September 21, 2021 | 5:23pm EDT

**Content warning: This piece contains graphic descriptions of experiences transgender individuals have had with TSA security.**

The mother of a transgender teenager has refiled a lawsuit against the Transportation Security Administration, arguing that her daughter's rights were violated while the two attempted to travel through Raleigh-Durham International Airport.

The lawsuit was originally filed last year, counsel for the plaintiff Jonathan Corbett said, but was dismissed for failing to give the TSA proper notice of the claim. It was refiled in August.

Though litigation is ongoing, the incident — which occurred over two years ago — speaks to the challenges and trauma often associated with security checkpoints for transgender travelers.

### Lawsuit details

In 2019, when Jamii Erway — a minor at the time — went through the TSA body scanner at RDU, the scanner registered a "false positive" alert, indicating that it had "detected an anomaly on her groin," according to the lawsuit. A TSA screener then instructed Erway to go to a private room where her genitals would be inspected, the lawsuit said.

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"They wanted her to take down her pants and underwear for visual inspection," Corbett said in an interview.

According to the lawsuit, the TSA operator advised Erway that she was not free to leave until she submitted to the strip search. Erway told the operator that she was transgender, but the operator declined to rescan her, according to the lawsuit.

Instead of submitting to a strip search, Erway and her mother left the airport and rented a car to drive over 600 miles to their destination in North Carolina.

After the incident, Erway has continued to experience symptoms of emotional distress including anxiety, shortness of breath, uncontrollable shaking and nausea when reminded of the incident. Erway has been unable to fly since, according to the lawsuit, even though she used to fly several times per year.

Erway and her mother are seeking money damages for loss of liberty, unconstitutional search and emotional damages. They are also seeking an injunction to prevent anyone else from going through a similar experience.

"It was a traumatic experience for Jamii, and we're hoping that we can get the TSA to better train its employees as to how to deal with trans rights and trans people in general," Corbett said.

TSA spokesperson Lorie Dankers declined to comment on the issue, citing that the TSA does not comment on pending litigation.

**LIL'CLOT**

### TSA scanners

According to a page on the TSA website for transgender passengers, when a traveler enters the TSA scanner, officers will push a button designating male or female "based on how you present yourself."

"It's only a binary option," LGBTQ+ educator and advocate Terri Phoenix said. "It's based basically on the operator's assumption based on a person's appearance."

The scanner's software also looks at the anatomy of designated male and female bodies differently, according to the TSA website, and the equipment indicates parts of the body "warranting further inspection if necessary."

"Trans men and trans women and nonbinary people often get flagged because they don't meet the societally defined definitions of what male and female bodies should look like," Phoenix said.

Dankers said in an email that the TSA cannot publicly provide information on the scanner's specific detection capabilities.

Prosthetics and binding garments, which are used commonly by transgender men to flatten their chests, frequently "register as anomalies" in the screening process, according to the National Center for Transgender Equality.

"The stereotypical definition of what should or shouldn't be on a male or female body is problematic, and it doesn't reflect the reality of real bodies in society," Phoenix said.

Phoenix also said the right to travel is fundamental for everyone, including transgender people.

If the scanner's alarm goes off, additional screening is carried out to determine whether a prohibited item is present, according to the TSA website. Additionally, passengers might have to undergo a pat-down procedure if an alarm is raised.

Pat-downs are performed by an officer of the same gender as the traveler presents, according to the TSA website.

Though Dankers did not comment on the pending litigation, she said in an email statement that the TSA does not conduct strip searches of any traveler.

Still, Corbett said that along with Erway, he has had several clients who have been forced into strip searches by the TSA.

"It happens more often than it should," he said.

### 'Such a common occurrence'

Nearly one in five transgender travelers have reported being harassed or disrespected by airport security screeners or other airport workers, according to the National Transgender Discrimination Survey.

A transgender UNC junior, who requested to remain anonymous, described his own experience with TSA security when he was traveling out of RDU in 2016 when he was 15 years old.

He was wearing a chest binder at the time, so when the TSA operator scanned him and selected "male," the scanner registered an anomaly in his chest, he said.

The male TSA operator then proceeded to do a pat-down search, the student said.

"He had to, through my T-shirt, put his fingers underneath the hem of my binder," the student said.

The student said that he wished the operator had given him a chance to say that he was transgender prior to the search.

"It just felt very invasive because I was a child, and he was an adult, and I didn't really feel like I had the choice to advocate for not wanting to be touched inappropriately," the student said.

He said he had heard about other transgender people experiencing pat-downs, but never thought it would happen to him.

"It's so frustrating that it's such a common occurrence," he said.

Because the Erways' lawsuit is in federal court, if the case does go to trial, the trial wouldn't happen for another two or three years, Corbett said.

"It's a pretty black-and-white matter," Corbett said. "They tried to strip-search a child when they had no lawful authority to do so. It doesn't matter what her gender identity is or whether she is trans or not, you don't do that to passengers."

@skwebb73

@DTHCityState | [city@dailytarheel.com](mailto:city@dailytarheel.com) | [elevate@dailytarheel.com](mailto:elevate@dailytarheel.com)

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