NEWS

"Not much longer shall we have time for reading lessons of the past. An inexorable present calls us to the defense of a great future."
HENRY LUCE '20 CO-FOUNDER OF TIME

After deportation flight controversy, an uncertain future for Avelo

BY QAMAR AL-TAMEEMI
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER



ZOE BERG
Local activists say that it was their pressure campaign that led to the suspension of Avelo Airlines' partnership with the Department of Homeland Security. The airline has cited a cost-benefit analysis instead.

2025 was a tumultuous year for New Haven's leading airline.

After Avelo Airlines announced last April that it would begin chartering deportation flights for the Department of Homeland Security, activists in New Haven and across the country organized a boycott and put up billboards publicly decrying the company's decision. Local organizations suspended their partnerships with the company.

After nine months of pushback, Avelo announced in January that it would pause the charter flights. Avelo representatives and community activists presented different claims about why the company ultimately ended its contract with DHS — and what the episode means for Avelo's future in New Haven.

"They've got a lot of work ahead of them to earn back the trust of this state, and I hope that they can," Connecticut Attorney General William Tong wrote in a statement after Avelo announced it would end its partnership with DHS in January. The Connecticut attorney general's office declined to comment for this article, directing the News to the earlier statement.

Avelo's leadership initially described its partnership with DHS as a means of boosting revenue amid poor performance at Tweed-New Haven Airport, where the airline dominates traffic. In an email to Avelo employees announcing the contract, CEO Andrew Levy cited his company's poor performance and noted that the first quarter of 2025 yielded its worst quarterly results since 2023, the News reported at the time.

A petition created by the New Haven Immigrants Coalition entitled, "We Won't fly Avelo until they stop ICE flights!" received over 40,000 signatures. Several protests occurred against the airline at Tweed Airport, with an April protest drawing a crowd of about 200, including Sen. Richard Blumenthal LAW '73, three New Haven alders and state Rep. Juan Candelaria.

Avelo announced in January that it would pause charter flights for DHS. In an internal email to Avelo staff obtained by the News, Levy said the partnership "provided short-term benefits" but acknowledged that the revenue was not high enough to "overcome its operational complexity and costs."

Courtney Goff, an Avelo spokesperson, wrote in an email to the News that the company's partnership with DHS did not impact the number of customers that chose to fly Avelo, citing increased customers on commercial service in 2025 compared to 2024.

"We stopped DHS flying because it was too infrequent to produce the anticipated revenue," Goff wrote in an email to the News. "We chose to utilize the planes elsewhere and recapitalize our network and fleet."

But local activists said it was the local community's pressure campaign that ended Avelo's collaboration with the DHS.

"They say it was about cost and complexity, but community pressure told the real story," CT Students For A Dream, a local organization involved in protesting against the airline, wrote in a social media post in January.

In a case study by the Coalition to Stop Avelo, a national activist group organized in light of the company's contract with DHS, organizers attributed Avelo's decision to a "sustained pressure campaign that Avelo could no longer ignore" and acknowledged the alliance of various activists involved in protesting against Avelo.

"Even though we were the ones who started with the campaign, at the end, there was this national pressure that really changed everything around what happened with this company," John Lugo, the community organizing director of the local immigrant activism group Unidad Latina en Accion, said in a phone interview.

Protests against the airline occurred at several other airports across the country, including Wilmington Airport in Delaware and Mesa Gateway Airport in Arizona. New Hampshire state Rep. Seth Miller created several billboards that urged, "Don't Fly Avelo."

Anne Watkins, an organizer with the New Haven Immigrants Coalition, highlighted the diverse alliance of community members and organizations that committed to the Avelo boycott, including groups like the New Haven Federation of Teachers and community organizing group New Haven Rising.

Regarding perceptions of Avelo now, Watkins said she thinks "people have a lot of different opinions about it."

"Some people feel like, 'Okay, they stopped the contract. We should fly them again.' Some people feel, 'Yeah, they stopped the contract, but they never apologized. They never acknowledged the harm that they caused.'" Watkins said.

Several local organizations, including Faxon Law New Haven Road Race and Puerto Ricans United Inc. severed ties with Avelo in light of their decision to partner with DHS. The road race terminated their existing sponsorship agreement with the airline in July. Puerto Ricans United Inc., which had previously received support from the airline, preemptively cut ties with the airline ahead of its 2025 Puerto Rican Festival.

In July 2025, Mayor Elicker prohibited the use of public funds to fly Avelo in a memo sent to city employees, as reported by NBC CT. In a phone interview on Tuesday, Elicker said the city had since lifted the policy.

Puerto Ricans United Inc. board president Joe Rodriguez wrote in an email to the News that since first announcing it would not again partner with Avelo, the airline had not approached the organization for a new sponsorship, and that the non-profit did not "plan to proactively reach out."

According to data from the United States Department of Transportation, Avelo's parent company, TEM Enterprises, carried out 88.35% of flights at Tweed Airport from March 2025 to February 2026.

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Even after monthslong scandal, ex-chief remembered for community ties

BY EVELYN RONAN
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It hasn't been a career-high year for Karl Jacobson.

In January, Jacobson, then the chief of the New Haven Police Department, abruptly resigned from his post as chief and later turned himself in on an arrest warrant for two charges of larceny. He allegedly embezzled a combined $85,500 from two city funds, one intended for paying confidential informants in the narcotics unit and the other for the city's Police Activity League. According to an affidavit, Jacobson bet more than $4 million on online gambling platforms during the time he was allegedly embezzling the funds. In April, the chief pleaded not guilty to the two larceny charges against him.

But even as his department moves on from him — on May 5, the city swore in David Zannelli, who was among the three assistant chiefs who confronted Jacobson with allegations of embezzlement — New Haveners remembered his tenure as an era of progressive strides on community engagement.

"He had the closest relationship to affected communities of any chief I've seen," Paul Bass '82, the founder of the New Haven Independent and longtime reporter on local policing, said in a phone interview. "I've been shocked at how little I've seen of that personal scandal reverberating at a larger scale."

Bass elaborated that the grievances about Jacobson allegedly stealing funds were limited to him and did not taint the department at large.

In a phone interview with the News, Mayor Justin Elicker said he didn't doubt that Jacobson "cared about New Haven." But he struck a colder tone, emphasizing that the transparency-focused approach that Jacobson championed also extended to his removal.

"It's important to understand the fact that holding Jacobson accountable builds more trust in the community," Elicker said. "When we talk about accountability, this is what we mean."

According to Bass, it wasn't policy shifts that marked Jacobson's term, but his overall "de-emphasization of arrest" and a focus on community ties.

"A good policy doesn't work if you don't have trust of the community, if you haven't been in people's kitchens and living rooms during tough times and helped them navigate crisis," Bass said.

Zannelli, an 18-year veteran of the NHPD, has suggested he wants to continue Jacobson's legacy of strengthening collaboration between the police and local community.

Jacobson's people-first approach took center stage in the wake of Randy Cox's arrest. New Haven police arrested Cox on June 19, 2022. He was handcuffed and placed in a police car without a seatbelt. The officer driving the car, Oscar Diaz, made a hard stop, which caused Cox to slam into the front of the vehicle. In body cam footage released promptly after the incident, Cox could be heard saying that his neck felt broken.

Diaz called for medical assistance but continued driving instead of waiting for paramedics to arrive and attend to Cox, who was then dragged face down into a holding cell, according to the police report. He could not move and repeatedly tried to get the officers to stop moving him. Officers in the footage can be heard saying Cox was "faking it" and doing "extra s—" before they dragged him out of the vehicle. The officers' "reckless" treatment of Cox, a New Haven Police Department Internal Affairs report found, led to his ultimate paralysis. Cox is now in a long-term care facility.

Jacobson moved to release bodycam footage of the incident and address the officers' violation of conventional policy immediately after the incident. In March 2023, after the release of the Internal Affairs report, Jacobson called for the dismissal of the involved officers, who were fired in August of that year.

"I think the community has asked us to be transparent and swift," Jacobson said while announcing his choice to call for the officers' dismissal, according to News coverage from the time. "We have put a lot of thought and investigation into this decision. We want to make sure that everything is done right, so that through this hearing, justice can be done."

Bass speculated that if Jacobson had handled the incident differently, "we would have the potential for riots."

"He had such a great connection with the people who were understandably upset," Bass said. "He and the mayor got so much good information right away, rather than being defensive, which another chief would've been."

Michael Lawlor, a former state representative and a professor at the University of New Haven's Henry C. Lee College of Criminal Justice and Forensic Sciences, said that Jacobson reached out to Cox's family immediately after the incident.

"That instinct to do something very uncomfortable immediately is a significant attribute of Karl," Lawlor said.

Jacobson later instituted a new policy in reaction to the Cox incident dubbed "medical Miranda," where officers transporting prisoners are required to ask if they need medical attention. Jacobson also co-signed a judge's decision not to expunge the records of the officers involved in Cox's arrest. Diaz, the officer driving the police car during the arrest, was later reinstated under Jacobson's leadership.

"He was big on procedural justice," Lawlor said, describing it as a central aspect of Jacobson's policing philosophy. "If you're a cop and you're dealing with a citizen, it's extremely important to explain what you're doing. He really instilled among the rank-and-file cops the importance of this."

Lawlor said Jacobson also emphasized policing strategies that acquainted officers with particular neighborhoods — such as walking beats, in which officers patrol neighborhoods on foot rather than in a car.

"When I came to New Haven, I became a better cop and a better person because I walked a beat," Jacobson said in a WNHH Community Radio interview six months into his term as chief. 15 years on, he still maintained community ties from that time, Jacobson said in the interview.

Lawlor said he considers Jacobson's community-focused approach to be the crux of his term as police chief.

"If you're gonna be a police chief anywhere, you have to be sort of a politician," Lawlor said. "A lot of cops have a tunnel vision approach to their job, but as a chief, you have to deal with the community, you have to explain things, and you have to be comforting. Karl really had that skillset."

Bass, the longtime reporter on local policing, contrasted Jacobson's controversy to a 2007 NHPD scandal in which a group of top cops stole thousands of dollars of reserved police department funds, prompting the departure of then-chief Francisco Ortiz.

The NHPD appointed James Lewis soon after in 2008, a chief who had never before worked in New Haven and took an "aggressive" approach to policing reminiscent of NHPD's militaristic crackdown in the 1980s. Lewis was responsible for 20 arrests in his first week as chief.

Bass said the fact that the city hired Zannelli "from within," instead of hiring an outsider, "means this is so different from 2008," adding that Zannelli maintained his predecessor's community-focused approach to policing.

"Zannelli has really good relationships with people from working in different neighborhoods," Bass said. "He's built up an extraordinary level of goodwill and trust in the community."

Karl Jacobson was sworn in as police chief on July 7, 2022.

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REETI MALHOTRA / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER
Karl Jacobson resigned from his post as the chief of the New Haven Police Department in January after being confronted with allegations of larceny. But locals still remember him for his "comforting" leadership and focus on community engagement.