



**U.S. Department of
Transportation**

Office of the Secretary
of Transportation

The Inspector General

Office of Inspector General
Washington, D.C. 20590

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Statement of DOT Inspector General Calvin L. Scovel III
on
Review of Airline Customer Service Commitments for Extended Ground Delays

As a result of recent incidents in which passengers were stranded aboard aircraft for protracted periods of time, the Secretary has asked us to review airline customer service commitments covering extended ground delays.

Accordingly, we will examine: (1) the airlines' customer service commitments, contracts of carriage, and policies addressing extended ground delays aboard aircraft and (2) particular situations involving American and JetBlue, taking into account any specific commitment these carriers made concerning policies and practices for meeting customers' essential needs during long on-board delays. In addition, we will make recommendations if we find steps that airlines, airports, or the Department might undertake to prevent a recurrence of such events. We also will identify any industry "best practices" employed for handling these types of situations.

In the past seven years, we have performed a number of customer service-related audits and reviews and issued our most recent update in November, 2006. We will assemble a team to respond to the Secretary's request and intend to report as expeditiously as possible in the months ahead. Our goal is to provide the Secretary, Congress, and the traveling public a thorough and objective assessment so that corrective actions can be taken by the appropriate parties to prevent such situations from happening again.

The Office of the Secretary's Aviation Consumer Protection Division has the responsibility for receiving individual complaints regarding aviation consumer issues and verifying compliance with DOT's aviation consumer protection requirements.

Their website is located at: <http://airconsumer.ost.dot.gov/problems.htm>, and provides more information on how to register a complaint by phone (202.366.2220) or via email at: airconsumer@dot.gov.

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Prior DOT OIG Work Products on Airline Customer Service

- November 21, 2006. Follow-up Review: Performance of U.S. Airlines in Implementing Selected Provisions of the Airline Customer Service Commitment. (<http://www.oig.dot.gov/item.jsp?id=1932>)

We issued a final report on our Follow-up Review: Performance of U.S. Airlines in Implementing Selected Provisions of the Airline Customer Service Commitment. This audit was requested by the Chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Aviation Subcommittee. We found that the airlines need to: (1) resume efforts to self audit their customer service plans; (2) emphasize to their customer service employees the importance of providing timely and adequate flight information; (3) focus on the training for personnel who assist passengers with disabilities; (4) provide straightforward, comprehensive reporting on frequent flyer award redemptions; and (5) improve the handling of bumped passengers.

We also found that the Department's Office of Aviation Enforcement and Proceedings (OAEP), which enforces air travel consumer protection rules, must improve its oversight of air traveler consumer protection requirements.

We made a series of recommendations to the Department to strengthen its oversight and enforcement of air traveler consumer protection rules. One such recommendation was that DOT develop strategies to more effectively monitor air carrier compliance with Federal requirements governing air travel consumer protection rules and to verify air carrier compliance with the terms and conditions of consent orders.

- February 28, 2005. Review of December 2004 Holiday Air Travel Disruptions (<http://www.oig.dot.gov/item.jsp?id=1510>)

Pursuant to Secretary Mineta's request of December 27, 2004, we issued a report on our review of the travel disruptions experienced over the December holiday travel period by Comair and US Airways. In conducting this review, we worked closely with the Department's Office of Aviation and International Affairs and Office of General Counsel. We found that Comair's problems were a function of severe weather at Cincinnati and failure of the computer system it used to schedule its crews. In Cincinnati, Comair's flight cancellations and delays ultimately affected over 260,000 passenger itineraries. At the time of our review, Comair temporarily addressed its computer problems with an interim fix

that doubled capacity until a new crew scheduling system could be installed in the summer of 2005.

Additionally, we found that US Airways' problems centered on staffing shortfalls going into the holiday travel period in two critical functions—fleet service employees and flight attendants, particularly at its Philadelphia hub. Plans to offset the staffing shortages through overtime and increasing the required number of hours worked by flight attendants did not work. US Airways canceled 405 flights during the holiday travel period, affecting more than 46,000 passengers and delayed over 3,900 flights affecting over 518,000 passengers.

Subsequently, US Airways made an intensive effort to increase staffing at its Philadelphia baggage operations and increased the monthly flying obligations of its flight attendants by 5 to 10 hours.

- June 20, 2001. Status Report on Airline Customer Service. (<http://www.oig.dot.gov/item.jsp?id=508>)

We presented testimony before the House Transportation and Infrastructure Aviation Subcommittee regarding progress made by 14 ATA airlines in improving customer service since our 2001 report. We reported that most airlines had: (1) incorporated the original Airline Customer Service Commitment into their contracts of carriage, (2) established performance measurement systems, and (3) petitioned DOT to revise regulations for reporting mishandled baggage and compensating passengers involuntarily bumped from a flight. The ATA airlines also formed a task force to develop plans for accommodating passengers delayed overnight, ensuring airport display monitors are accurate, and providing for passengers' needs during long on-board delays.

- February 12, 2001. Final Report on Airline Customer Service Commitment. (<http://www.oig.dot.gov/item.jsp?id=12>)

We issued our “Final Report on Airline Customer Service Commitment.” Overall, we found that the airlines were making progress toward meeting the Commitment and that the Commitment had been beneficial to air travelers on a number of important fronts. Notwithstanding progress by the ATA airlines toward meeting the Commitment, we also found significant shortfalls in reliable and timely communication with passengers by the ATA airlines about flight delays and cancellations. Further, we found the Commitment did not directly address the most deep-seated cause of customer dissatisfaction—flight delays and cancellations, and what the Airlines plan to do about them in the areas under

their control in the immediate term. As required by law, the report included a section on recommendations that Congress, the Department, and air carriers may wish to consider.

- June 27, 2000. Interim Report on Airline Customer Service Commitment. (<http://www.oig.dot.gov/item.jsp?id=48>)

We issued an Interim Report on Airline Customer Service Commitment which provided the preliminary results and observations on (1) the status of implementing the commitment and the Airlines' Plans to carry out the Commitment, and (2) whether the Airlines modified their contract of carriage to reflect all items in their Plans.