

# **ACTIONS NEEDED TO MINIMIZE LONG, ON-BOARD FLIGHT DELAYS**

*Office of the Secretary of Transportation*

*Report Number: AV-2007-077*

*Date Issued: September 25, 2007*



# Memorandum

U.S. Department of  
Transportation

Office of the Secretary  
of Transportation  
Office of Inspector General

Subject: **ACTION:** Actions Needed To Minimize Long,  
On-Board Flight Delays  
Office of the Secretary of Transportation  
Report Number AV-2007-077

Date: September 25, 2007

From: Calvin L. Scovel III *C. L. Scovel III*  
Inspector General

Reply to  
Attn. of: JA-1

To: Secretary of Transportation

Thousands of passengers suffered long, on-board aircraft delays triggered by severe weather last winter, causing serious concerns about the airlines' contingency planning for such situations.

- On December 29, 2006, the Dallas-Fort Worth area experienced unseasonably severe weather that generated massive lightning storms and a tornado warning; this caused the airport to shut down operations several times over an 8-hour period. American Airlines (American) diverted over 100 flights, and many passengers on those flights were stranded on board aircraft on the tarmac for as long as 9 hours. The number of diversions on this date was second only to the number reached on September 11, 2001.
- On February 14, 2007, snow and ice blanketed the northeastern United States. JetBlue Airways (JetBlue) stranded hundreds of passengers aboard its aircraft on the tarmac at John F. Kennedy International Airport (JFK) for as long as 10 and a half hours. At 1 point during that day, JetBlue had 52 aircraft on the ground with only 21 available gates. JetBlue has publicly admitted shortcomings in its systems that were in place at the time for handling such situations.

This report presents the results of the review you requested in response to these incidents. Our audit objectives—based on your February 26, 2007, memorandum—were to: (1) look into the specific incidents involving American and JetBlue, during which passengers were stranded on board aircraft for extended

periods of time; (2) examine the Air Transport Association's (ATA)<sup>1</sup> member airlines'<sup>2</sup> customer service plans, contracts of carriage,<sup>3</sup> and internal policies dealing with long, on-board delays; (3) highlight best practices that could help deal with these situations; and (4) provide recommendations on what airlines, airports, and the Government can do to prevent recurrence of such events.

Other incidents in 2006 and 2007 highlight airline customer service issues and the need for coordinated contingency planning to prevent long, on-board delays:

- On December 20, 2006, severe blizzards closed Denver's airport, causing several flights to divert to other airports. United Airlines diverted two flights to Cheyenne, Wyoming. The following morning, United's flight crew and attendants boarded the aircraft and departed, leaving all 110 passengers behind to take care of themselves.
- On March 16, 2007, an ice storm hit the Northeast, causing numerous delays and cancellations and forcing passengers to endure long, on-board flight delays. In fact, several Office of Inspector General staff were flying that day and observed first-hand a 9-hour, on-board delay.
- On July 29, 2007, because of severe weather, a Continental Airlines flight from Caracas, Venezuela, to Newark, New Jersey, was diverted to Baltimore-Washington International Airport, where passengers were stranded on the tarmac for over 4 hours. Because this was an international flight, Federal law prohibited Continental from allowing passengers off the plane; however, Continental could have provided for customers' essential needs during this ordeal.
- On August 9, 2007, severe, east-bound weather stranded hundreds of US Airways passengers on board aircraft at Philadelphia International Airport, some for up to 6 hours.
- On August 11, 2007, at Los Angeles International Airport, more than 17,000 in-bound passengers on 73 international flights were stranded on board aircraft or in the terminal holding area for 10 hours because U.S. Customs authorities were unable to screen them due to a computer outage. We note that in incidents involving international flights, airlines and airports have little, if

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<sup>1</sup> The Air Transport Association is the trade association for America's largest air carriers. Its members transport over 90 percent of all the passenger and cargo traffic in the United States.

<sup>2</sup> The 13 ATA member airlines included in our review were: Alaska Airlines, Aloha Airlines, American Airlines, ATA Airlines, Continental Airlines, Delta Air Lines, Hawaiian Airlines, JetBlue Airways, Midwest Airlines, Northwest Airlines, Southwest Airlines, United Airlines, and US Airways. During our review, ATA Airlines terminated its membership in ATA.

<sup>3</sup> A contract of carriage is the document air carriers use to specify legal obligations to passengers. Each air carrier must provide a copy of its contract of carriage free of charge upon request. The contract of carriage is also available for public inspection at airports and ticket offices.

any, control over the amount of time passengers are inconvenienced because passenger screening and processing is outside of their control.

We conducted this review between March 2007 and September 2007, in accordance with generally accepted Government Auditing Standards as prescribed by the Comptroller General of the United States. To conduct our analysis, we requested a range of data from selected airlines related to weather, operations, and customer service. Exhibits A through D provide details on: (A) our objectives, scope and methodology, and related audits; (B) selected airlines' terms and conditions for handling long, on-board delays; (C) selected airports' policies for assisting in long, on-board delays; and (D) stakeholders visited or contacted.

## BACKGROUND

Accommodating passengers during long, on-board delays is a major customer service challenge that airlines face. However, this is not a new problem for the airlines. Airline customer service first took center stage in January 1999, when hundreds of passengers remained in planes on snowbound Detroit runways for up to 8 and a half hours. After those events, both the House and Senate considered whether to enact a "passenger bill of rights."

Following hearings after the January 1999 incident, Congress, the Department of Transportation (DOT), and ATA agreed that the air carriers should have an opportunity to improve their customer service without legislation. To demonstrate the airlines' ongoing dedication to improving air travel, ATA and its member airlines executed the Airline Customer Service Commitment (the Commitment),<sup>4</sup> on June 17, 1999. Each ATA airline agreed to prepare a customer service plan implementing the 12 provisions of the Commitment (see figure 1); including a provision to meet customers' essential needs during long, on-aircraft delays; and prepare contingency plans to address such circumstances.

### **Figure 1. Provisions of the Airline Customer Service Commitment**

- Offer the lowest fare available.
- Notify customers of known delays, cancellations, and diversions.
- Deliver baggage on time.
- Support an increase in the baggage liability limit.
- Allow reservations to be held or cancelled.
- Provide prompt ticket refunds.
- Properly accommodate disabled and special-needs passengers.
- Meet customers' essential needs during long, on-aircraft delays.
- Handle "bumped" passengers with fairness and consistency.
- Disclose travel itinerary, cancellation policies, frequent flyer rules, and aircraft configuration.
- Ensure good customer service from code-share partners.
- Be more responsive to customer complaints.

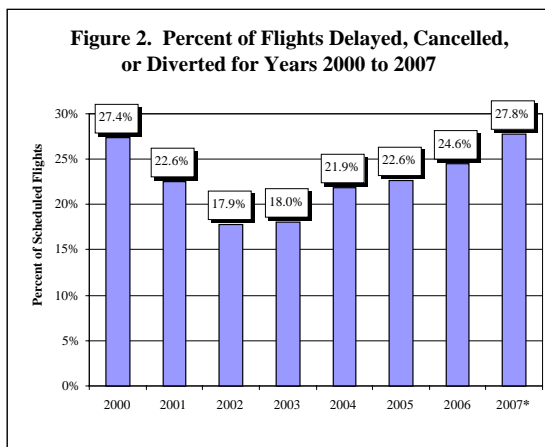
Source: Airline Customer Service Commitment, June 1999

<sup>4</sup> ATA signed the Commitment on behalf of the then 14 ATA member airlines (Alaska Airlines, Aloha Airlines, American Airlines, American Trans Air, America West Airlines, Continental Airlines, Delta Air Lines, Hawaiian Airlines, Midwest Express Airlines, Northwest Airlines, Southwest Airlines, Trans World Airlines, United Airlines, and US Airways). JetBlue was not an airline or a member of ATA when ATA made its commitments.

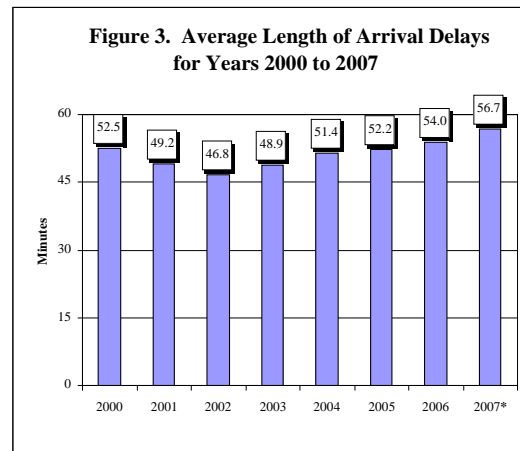
Because aviation delays and cancellations continued to worsen, eventually reaching their peak during the summer of 2000, Congress directed our office to evaluate the effectiveness of the Commitment and the customer service plans of individual ATA airlines. We issued our final report<sup>5</sup> in February 2001. Although the ATA airlines made progress toward meeting the Commitment, we found that the Commitment did not directly address the underlying causes of deep-seated customer dissatisfaction—flight delays and cancellations. This is still the case today with record-breaking flight delays and cancellations leading to more long, on-board delays.

### Rising Flight Delays Are Leading to More Long, On-Board Delays

Based on the first 7 months of the year, it is clear that 2007 may be the busiest<sup>6</sup> travel period since the peak of 2000 and may surpass the 2000 record levels for flight delays, cancellations, and diversions. So far in 2007, nearly 28 percent of flights were delayed, cancelled, or diverted compared to about 24 percent during the same period in 2006. In 2006, nearly 25 percent of domestic flights were delayed, cancelled, or diverted, the highest percentage since peak year 2000, when it hit 27 percent. Figure 2 illustrates the changes in percentage of domestic flights delayed, cancelled, or diverted from 2000 to 2007.



\*January through July  
Source: BTS data



\*January through July  
Source: BTS data

Not only are there more delays, but also longer delay durations. Of domestic flights arriving late in 2006, the average delay was a record-breaking 54 minutes. Figure 3 illustrates the changes in the average length of flight delays from 2000 to 2007. Based on the first 7 months of data, it is clear that 2007 could be even

<sup>5</sup> OIG Report Number AV-2001-020, “Final Report on Airline Customer Service Commitment,” February 12, 2001. OIG reports and testimonies are available on our website: [www.oig.dot.gov](http://www.oig.dot.gov).

<sup>6</sup> As measured by scheduled departures.

worse. For flights that arrived late, passengers experienced an average flight delay of nearly 57 minutes, up nearly 3 minutes from 2006.

These rising flight delays are leading to more on-board tarmac delays. Based on the first 7 months of 2007, over 54,000 scheduled flights—affecting nearly 3.7 million passengers—experienced taxi-in and taxi-out times of 1 to 5 hours or more (see table 1). This is an increase of nearly 42 percent (from 38,076 to 54,029) as compared to the same period in 2006.

**Table 1. Number of Flights With Long, On-Board Tarmac Delays of 1 to 5+ Hours January Through July of 2006 and 2007**

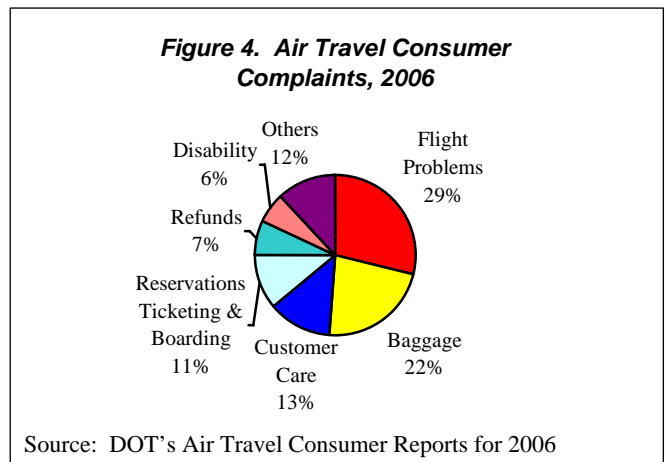
Time Period	2006	2007	% Change
1-2 Hrs.	33,438	47,558	42.23
2-3 Hrs.	3,781	5,213	37.87
3-4 Hrs.	710	1,025	44.37
4-5 Hrs.	120	189	57.50
5 or > Hrs.	27	44	62.96
<b>Total:</b>	<b>38,076</b>	<b>54,029</b>	<b>41.90</b>

Source: OIG analysis based on BTS data

### Rising Flight Delays Are Also Leading to More Air Traveler Complaints

DOT’s Air Travel Consumer Reports disclosed that, for the first 7 months of 2007, complaints against U.S. airlines increased nearly 65 percent (3,947 to 6,504) over complaints during the same period in 2006, with complaints relating to flight problems (delays, cancellations, and missed connections) more than doubling (1,096 to 2,468) for the same period. Complaints in 2007 have already exceeded full-year 2006 complaint totals, including complaints about flight problems.

Over the last several years, flight problems have ranked as the number one air traveler complaint to DOT, with baggage complaints and customer care<sup>7</sup> ranked as number two and number three, respectively. As shown in figure 4, flight problems accounted for more than one-quarter of all complaints the Department received in 2006. So far, this year is



<sup>7</sup> Complaints such as poor employee attitude, refusal to provide assistance, unsatisfactory seating, and unsatisfactory food service are categorized as customer care complaints.

becoming a near record-breaking year percentage-wise for flight problem complaints, with those accounting for nearly 38 percent of all complaints the Department received in the first 7 months of 2007.

### **Passengers' Flight Experiences Are Further Complicated by Capacity and Demand Matters**

Air travelers' dissatisfaction with flight problems, especially cancellations, is further compounded by reduced capacity and increased demand, which leads to fuller flights. Domestic-wide, the first 6 months of 2007 (the most recent data available) compared to the same period in peak-year 2000 show that:

- The number of scheduled flights (capacity) decreased from 5.5 million in 2000 to 5.0 million in 2007, a drop of 9 percent. Scheduled seats also declined by over 9 percent between 2000 and 2007, from 510 million to 462 million.
- Even though the number of flights and seats declined, passenger enplanements went up over 12 percent, from 312 million passengers in 2000 to 350 million passengers in 2007.
- Reduced capacity and increased demand led to fuller flights. For 2007, average load factors increased from 71.1 percent in 2000 to 79.7 percent in 2007, with an unprecedented 86.1 percent in June.
- *Reduced capacity and higher load factors can also result in increased passenger inconvenience and dissatisfaction with customer service. With more seats filled, air carriers have fewer options to accommodate passengers from cancelled flights.*

The extent to which delays and cancellations will continue to impact passengers in 2007 depends on several key factors, including weather conditions, the impact of the economy on air travel demand, and capacity management at already congested airports.

### **EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW**

Flight delays and cancellations continue as a major source of customer dissatisfaction. The severity of the on-board delays last winter drew national attention and demonstrated that airlines, airports, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), and DOT must work together to reduce long, on-board delays and minimize the impact on passengers when these delays occur. The winter events that received the most attention concerned two carriers: American and JetBlue. On December 29, 2006, American's operations at Dallas-Fort Worth

International Airport (DFW) were severely affected by unprecedented weather leading to 654 flight cancellations, 124 diversions, and 44 long on-board delays exceeding 4 hours. The diversions to Austin-Bergstrom International Airport generated substantial interest because some of the lengthiest on-board delays occurred there—in one case, for over 9 hours. JetBlue’s JFK operations also suffered on February 14, 2007, when severe weather hit the northeastern United States, leading to 355 cancellations, 6 diversions; and 26 long, on-board delays exceeding 4 hours.

While weather was the primary contributor to the extraordinary flight disruptions it was not the only factor in passengers being stranded on board aircraft for long periods of time. We found that neither airline had a system-wide policy or procedure in place to mitigate long, on-board delays and off-load passengers within a certain period of time. American also did not control the number of diverted flights to some airports, which overwhelmed its operations at Austin.

JetBlue was committed to its long-standing practice of not cancelling flights. As a result, its personnel at JFK airport became overwhelmed with the sheer number of arriving and departing aircraft on the ground at the same time, with no gates available for deplaning passengers on arriving flights.

We also found that other airlines experienced flight disruptions on those two dates; some were able to minimize the time passengers spent on-board aircraft while others experienced similar on-board delays. For example, Delta Airlines had more flights delayed at JFK than JetBlue on February 14, 2007, with a total of 54 flights being delayed more than 1 hour versus 43 for JetBlue.

We examined 13 airlines’ customer service plans, including customer service commitments, contracts of carriage, policies, and contingency plans dealing with extended ground delays aboard aircraft. In addition, we reviewed 13 selected airports’<sup>8</sup> contingency plans. We found that both airline and airport contingency plans are limited in addressing long, on-board delays. In fact, we found that there has been little improvement from what we reported in 2001—that only a few airlines’ contingency plans specified in any detail the efforts planned to get passengers off the aircraft when delayed for extended periods and that airlines had not clearly and consistently defined terms in the 1999 Commitment provision (such as what constitutes an “extended period of time” for meeting passengers essential needs or a “long, on-board delay” before deplaning passengers).

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<sup>8</sup> Austin-Bergstrom International, Chicago O’Hare International, Dallas/Fort Worth International, Dallas Love Field, General Mitchell International, George Bush Intercontinental, Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International, Honolulu International, Indianapolis International, John F. Kennedy International, Minneapolis-St. Paul International, Phoenix Sky Harbor International, and Seattle-Tacoma International.



Our examination of the 13 airports, including 12 major hub airports, (see exhibit C) found that only 2 airports have a process for monitoring and mitigating long, on-board delays that involves contacting the airline to request a plan of action after an aircraft has remained for 2 hours on the tarmac. We also found that airports intervene only upon an airline's request primarily because they do not have the authority to interfere with a carrier's operations during long, on-board delays.

Airport operators must collaborate with airlines to establish a policy for how long passengers can be kept aboard aircraft while on the ground during extraordinary flight disruptions.

As requested, we also identified best practices and initiatives that could help deal with long on-board delays. For example, some airlines and airports keep gate space open for off-loading passengers in times of irregular operations. Some also constantly monitor aircraft on the tarmac so when an aircraft remains for more than a certain period of time (typically 2 hours), the airline manager can coordinate the aircraft's return to a gate. Also, two major airport operators—the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey and Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport—are looking into procedural improvements, such as more efficient use of the runways at JFK, and customer service improvements, such as best methods for getting passengers off aircraft and reducing the amount of time they are kept on aircraft. These practices are good steps, but, in our opinion, a more comprehensive plan of action is needed to mitigate long, on-board delays and should involve collaboration among airlines, airports, FAA, and DOT.

We still maintain that all airlines' customer service plans should specify in detail the efforts that will be made to get passengers off aircraft that are delayed for long periods, either before departure or after arrival. Airlines should also incorporate these policies in their contracts of carriage and post them on their Internet sites. To ensure adherence to the policies, airlines must resume efforts to self-audit their customer service plans. We recommended most of these actions in our 2001 report, and the airlines agreed and stated plans to implement them. We realize that setting a time limit on delay durations will have to be tailored to individual airlines and airports and will heavily depend on the situation. Airlines and airports need to work together to determine the various situations that can occur and devise plans for handling those occurrences.

The airlines also agreed to establish a task force of representatives from airlines, airports, and FAA to develop and coordinate contingency plans to deal with lengthy delays. Although the task force was formed, the effort never materialized as priorities shifted after September 11, 2001. In our testimony before the House

Subcommittee on Aviation in April 2007,<sup>9</sup> we recommended that the task force be reconvened, and, to date, there still has been no action to do so. Now is the time for airlines to reconvene a national task force and develop and coordinate contingency plans with local airports and FAA to deal with lengthy delays.

In addition, DOT should take a more active role in overseeing customer service issues to ensure that airlines comply with their policies governing long, on-board delays, especially in the event that health and safety hazards arise from such delays, and advise Congress if the airlines retreat from the commitment provisions or dilute the language in the current contracts of carriage.

## **SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS**

Our recommendations focus on actions that could help the Department, airlines, and airports improve customer service for air travelers; these include:

- Defining what constitutes an “extended period of time” for meeting passengers’ essential needs and setting limits for delay durations.
- Establishing specific targets for reducing chronically delayed or cancelled flights.
- Disclosing on-time flight performance.
- Requiring airports to establish a process for monitoring lengthy, on-board delays.
- Establishing a national task force of airlines, airports, and FAA to develop and coordinate contingency plans to deal with lengthy delays.
- Conducting incident investigations involving long, on-board ground delays.
- Directing the Office of Aviation Enforcement and Proceedings to ensure that airlines comply with their public policies governing long, on-board delays.

A complete list of our recommendations can be found on pages 21 and 22.

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<sup>9</sup> OIG Testimony Number CC-2007-046, “Actions Needed To Improve Airline Customer Service,” April 20, 2007.

## **DEPARTMENT, AIRLINE, AND AIRPORT COMMENTS**

We provided American Airlines, JetBlue Airways, and Airports Council International-North America with various sections of our report related to their airline or organization and included their comments as appropriate. On September 19, 2007, we met with Air Transport Association and airline representatives to discuss our report. We provided the Office of the Secretary's General Counsel and the Assistant Secretary for Aviation and International Affairs Offices with our draft report. On September 20, 2007, we met with staff from General Counsel's Office of Aviation Enforcement and Proceedings and received their verbal comments. Their comments were incorporated into this report as appropriate.

We also received a memorandum from the Secretary of Transportation on September 24, 2007, which stated that she is fully committed to improving the air travel environment for passengers. The Secretary has directed DOT staff to carefully consider the recommendations in this report, including those for improving the information provided to the public and the manner in which passengers are treated, including compliance by carriers with their own policies. The appendix to this report presents the full text of the Secretary's memorandum.

## **ACTION REQUIRED**

In accordance with Department of Transportation Order 8000.1C, within 30 calendar days, please provide us with your formal written comments regarding the specific actions that DOT plans to take to implement our recommendations along with timeframes for completion. We will consider the recommendations unresolved until we receive the requested information.

We appreciate the courtesies and cooperation of Department of Transportation and airlines' and airports' representatives during this audit. If you have any questions concerning this report, please contact me at (202) 366-1959 or Todd Zinser, Deputy Inspector General, at (202) 366-6767.

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cc: Chief of Staff  
Office of General Counsel  
Assistant Secretary for Aviation and International Affairs  
Acting FAA Administrator

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## FINDINGS

Airlines and airports continue to face challenges in mitigating extraordinary flight disruptions such as long, on-board delays during extreme weather. Based on BTS data, 659,988 flights were delayed in 2006 *due to poor weather conditions* (9.2 percent of all commercial flights). Based on the first 7 months of 2007, the number of flights delayed *due to poor weather conditions* increased by nearly 18 percent for the same period in 2006 and is on pace to exceed 2006 totals.

These delays occurred throughout the system and at many airlines, and, after the severe long on-board delays that occurred last winter, the Secretary asked that we assess airlines' contingency planning for such situations. Overall, we found that: (1) the on-board delays that passengers endured last winter were largely due to airlines' lack of a system-wide policy to minimize such delays; (2) airlines' and airports' customer service contingency plans are still not adequate to handle these occurrences; (3) airlines and airports have best practices and are moving forward with other initiatives to help mitigate these delays; and (4) there are other actions that airlines, airports, FAA, and DOT can undertake immediately to address such situations.

### **Lack of a System-Wide Policy Contributed to American's and JetBlue's Long, On-Board Delays**

While weather was the primary contributor to the extraordinary flight disruptions it was not the only factor in passengers being stranded on board aircraft for long periods of time. We found that American and JetBlue experienced long, on-board delays on December 29, 2006, and February 14, 2007, respectively, because they both lacked a system-wide policy and procedure to minimize long, on-board delays and off-load passengers within a certain period of time. American also did not control the number of diverted flights to some airports, which overwhelmed their operations. In Austin, some passengers experienced delays on the tarmac for over 9 hours under American's "monitor and evaluate" approach. Contrary to some media reports, American did provide food, water, and tolerable restroom facilities on the aircraft delayed in Austin; however, some passengers felt American's efforts were inadequate in that regard.

JetBlue was committed to its long-standing practice of not cancelling flights whenever possible. As a result, its personnel at JFK airport in New York became overwhelmed with the sheer number of arriving and departing aircraft on the ground at the same time, with no gates available for deplaning passengers. Based on weather forecasts for that day, both airlines were optimistic that the severe weather would subside and that the delayed and diverted flights would be able to

## Findings

depart, but the break in the weather never materialized. Since the incidents, both airlines have taken actions to facilitate better planning when these incidents occur.

We also found that other airlines experienced flight disruptions on those two dates; some were able to minimize the time passengers spent on-board aircraft while others experienced similar on-board delays.

### *Severe Weather in Texas Caused American To Divert an Extraordinary Number of Flights on December 29, Resulting in Thousands of Passengers Experiencing Long Delays on Aircraft*

On December 29, 2006, severe weather that generated massive lightning storms, and a tornado warning in the Dallas-Fort Worth area caused American to cancel, divert, or delay over 1,100 of its 1,600 (69 percent) scheduled flights into DFW, disrupting holiday travel plans for over 13,000 passengers system-wide. American diverted 130 flights; 124 flights were bound for DFW but had to be diverted to 24 nearby airports. The number of diversions on December 29 ranked as the second largest in American's history, the first being September 11, 2001.

Table 2 shows the seven airports that accepted the majority (63 percent) of the DFW diversions on that day. Ultimately, out of the more than 314,000 passengers American carried that day, 4,738 American passengers on 44 diverted flights endured long, on-board delays of over 4 hours.

**Table 2. Seven Airports Accepting Most of American's Diversions**

<b>Airport</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>No. of Diversions</b>
San Antonio Regional	San Antonio, TX	13
Shreveport Regional	Shreveport, LA	12
Adams Field	Little Rock, AR	11
Will Rogers World	Oklahoma City, OK	11
Austin-Bergstrom International	Austin, TX	11
Tulsa International	Tulsa, OK	10
Midland International	Midland, TX	10
<b>Total</b>		<b>78</b>

Source: OIG

### *American's Lack of System-Wide Policy, Diversion Recovery Approach, and Only Partial Adherence to Austin-Bergstrom Local Policy Caused Long, On-Board Delays*

American did not have a system-wide policy to minimize long, on-board delays or an established time and system for deplaning passengers in the event of extraordinary on-board (tarmac) delays. American also did not control the number of diverted flights to some airports, which overwhelmed their operations. We focused our review of the December 29 events on the 11 American flights that

## **Findings**

were diverted to Austin, where some of the lengthiest on-board delays occurred. We found that American did not fully adhere to its local policy to deplane passengers upon request when a delayed or diverted flight is held for more than 2 hours.

Under its “monitor and evaluate” approach, American kept passengers on aircraft, intending for the diverted flights to re-depart and reach their ultimate destinations, but the severe weather conditions on that day prevented some of the diverted flights from doing that. For American, when severe weather hit, the normal practice was to divert aircraft to nearby airports not affected by the severe weather and wait out the storms. American usually diverted aircraft to a nearby airport without a plan to spread out its diversions. This practice heavily weighed down operations at Austin. At two points during that day, American’s pilots on the ground at Austin could not reach the local dispatcher to request a gate assignment and ended up contacting FAA air traffic controller for assistance who was also unsuccessful in contacting the local dispatcher.

American also failed to deplane passengers upon request in Austin when the diverted flights were held for more than 2 hours. On 8 of the 11 diverted flights, 74 of the 979 passengers, most of which had final destinations of Austin or San Antonio, were deplaned in Austin on December 29. However, several passengers we interviewed from two of the eight flights stated that they had requested to deplane but were not accommodated.

Table 3 below shows the number of hours that each flight was on the ground in Austin. Some passengers were stranded on board for 6 hours or longer on 4 of the 11 diverted flights, with the longest on-board delay reaching over 9 hours. For 5 of the 11 diverted flights, with on-board delays of less than 2 and a half hours, American’s “monitor and evaluate” approach paid off with those flights reaching DFW the same day. The other six flights were not as fortunate, with passengers remaining overnight in Austin and arriving at DFW the next day.

## **Findings**

**Table 3. Length of On-Board Delay and Outcome of the 11 Diverted Flights to Austin**

Flight Origin City/Number	Length of On-Board Delay	Flight Outcome
San Francisco, CA Flight #1348	9 hours 16 minutes	Diverted/remained overnight/ arrived DFW next day
Los Angeles, CA Flight #2412	7 hours 14 minutes	Cancelled/rebooked/arrived DFW next day
Oakland, CA Flight #1008	7 hours 6 minutes	Diverted/remained overnight/ arrived DFW next day
Fresno, CA Flight #534	6 hours 8 minutes	Diverted/remained overnight/ arrived DFW next day
Seattle, WA Flight #2302	2 hours 26 minutes	Diverted/arrived DFW same day
Fresno, CA Flight #1372	2 hours 16 minutes	Diverted/remained overnight/ arrived DFW next day
Vancouver, British Columbia Flight #330	2 hours 8 minutes	Diverted/arrived DFW same day
Salt Lake City, UT Flight #1074	2 hours 4 minutes	Diverted/remained overnight/ arrived DFW next day
San Jose, CA Flight #1514	1 hour 39 minutes	Diverted/arrived DFW same day
Orange County, CA Flight #592	1 hour 32 minutes	Diverted/arrived DFW same day
San Diego, CA Flight #1708	1 hour 31 minutes	Diverted/arrived DFW same day

Source: OIG

**At Austin-Bergstrom Airport, Some Passengers Were Dissatisfied With American’s Attempts To Meet Their Needs During the Delays.** We interviewed passengers from 2 of the 11 diverted flights—flights 1348 and 534—to obtain passenger feedback on the events of the day at the Austin airport.

Flight 1348 was scheduled to depart San Francisco at 6:05 a.m. Pacific Time, but, due to mechanical problems (the passengers had to change gates and aircraft), the flight did not depart until 7:10 a.m. Pacific Time, with 113 passengers on board.

While en route to DFW, the flight was diverted to Austin because of the severe weather in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. Several passengers with Austin and San Antonio as their final destinations were allowed to deplane and go to the airport terminal via bus. The remaining passengers stayed on board expecting to reach their final destinations or make their connecting flight at DFW.

At 10:05 p.m. Central Time, after sitting on the ground in Austin for 9 hours, with a total on-board time of almost 13 hours, the passengers were finally deplaned and remained overnight in Austin. Although American offered vouchers for hotel accommodations and meals to passengers on flight 1348—36 hotel vouchers and

## Findings



11 meal vouchers in total—not all passengers were accommodated. Those passengers may not have been aware that American was offering the vouchers or did not want to wait in line and found overnight accommodations on their own. The flight continued to DFW the following day. Passengers on this flight were later given flight vouchers valued up to \$500 by American.

Passengers on flight 534 from Fresno, California, experienced similar circumstances with a shorter on-board delay of 6 hours in Austin. Although the passengers on both flights confirmed that snacks and beverages were served and the restroom facilities were tolerable, passengers we interviewed felt that American's efforts to meet their essential needs during the delays were insufficient given the length of the delays.

### *American Has Since Instituted a System-Wide Policy Designed To Avoid Long, On-Board Delays*

After the December 29 incident, American instituted a new policy designed to prevent on-board delays from exceeding 4 hours and implemented an airborne diversion distribution plan aimed at spreading out its diversions to more airports to prevent overloading any given airport. American has also implemented decision assistance technology designed to “automatically track and monitor delayed and diverted flights and assist in creating a centralized approach for the prioritizing the handling of such flights.”

American was able to demonstrate its new policy and plan during an incident that occurred on February 24, 2007. On that day, American's operations at DFW were significantly affected by severe wind gusts of 37 to 47 knots (about 43 to 55 miles per hour), causing the airport to close for over 5 hours. American diverted 76 flights bound for DFW to 32 airports, with no single airport handling more than 9 diversions. This is in contrast to December 29, 2006, when 124 flights were diverted to 24 airports, with almost a third of them (7 airports) handling 10 or more diversions.

While the February 24 disruption was the 7<sup>th</sup> worst diversion day in American's history, only 1 flight (34 passengers) experienced on-board delays of over 4 hours versus the 44 flights (4,738 passengers) on December 29, 2006, and that was due to an absence of U.S. Customs officials at the diversion airport. According to American, the results of the February 24 experience indicate that its new 4-hour policy and diversion plan worked well to avoid long, on-board delays during extraordinary events.

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*JetBlue Ran Out of Gate Availability on February 14, Stranding Thousands of Passengers on Aircraft for Extended Periods of Time*

On February 14, 2007, a severe ice storm hit the northeastern United States, causing JetBlue to eventually cancel 355 departures and arrivals, incur 6 diversions, and strand passengers on 26 flights for over 4 hours, all at its JFK hub. See table 4 for a breakdown of JetBlue's long, on-board delays at JFK. Ultimately, 31,569 JetBlue passengers were affected by cancellations, delays, or diversions at JFK between February 13 and 20.

**Table 4. Breakdown of JetBlue's Long, On-Board Arrival and Departure Delays at JFK**

Number of On-Board Delays Over 1 hour	43
Number of On-Board Delays Over 4 hours	26
Number of On-Board Delays Over 5 hours	21
Number of Passengers That Endured On-Board Delays Over 4 hours	2,962
Average Time Delay for Arrivals (in minutes)	265
Average Time Delay for Departures (in minutes)	298

Source: OIG

Initial weather forecasts for JFK on February 14 predicted rain in the morning with temperatures slightly higher than 32 degrees; the weather was dramatically worse with freezing rain starting around 8:00 a.m. JetBlue's flights continued to arrive at the airport, although flights could not depart—only 2 of the first 13 scheduled morning flights departed—thereby causing gridlock on the airport tarmac.

By 8:30 a.m., JetBlue ran out of gate space and asked FAA's Air Traffic Control to issue a ground stop<sup>10</sup> on all JetBlue flights headed for JFK. At 11:00 a.m., JetBlue requested that FAA issue a ground stop for all its flights system-wide whether or not they were heading to JFK—an unprecedented request according to FAA. This request was due to JetBlue's operations control center being overwhelmed with the JFK situation.

JetBlue officials stated that they contacted the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey (the Port Authority) at 1:30 p.m., asking for buses to off-load passengers from five aircraft stuck on the tarmac. By 3:00 p.m., the temperature still remained below freezing and airport surfaces were covered with ice. Around 3:30 p.m., the Port Authority finally started to off-load passengers from the five stranded flights.

By nightfall on February 14, JetBlue had 52 aircraft on the ground at JFK, instead of the usual 22, and only 21 gates. JetBlue called other airlines, including foreign

<sup>10</sup> During an FAA ground stop, flights destined to the affected airport are held at their departure point for the duration of the ground stop.

## Findings

airlines, to see about available gates, but no gates were available. The airport also unsuccessfully tried to assist JetBlue in finding gates for its flights. Based on our review of the events of that day, it appears that the airlines and airports were trying to help each other; however, the severe weather hampered much movement of aircraft on the airfield.

By the end of the day, JetBlue had cancelled 80 percent of its arrivals and 89 percent of its departures for that day. JetBlue had to cancel another 55 percent of its scheduled arrivals and 50 percent of its departures on February 15. These cancellations were related to both the weather and the fact that JetBlue did not have crew and aircraft available.

### *JetBlue's Lack of Policy and Reluctance To Cancel Flights Caused Long, On-Board Delays*

JetBlue did not have a policy to minimize long, on-board delays or an established time and system for deplaning passengers in the event of extraordinary on-board (tarmac) delays. In addition, JetBlue was committed to its long-standing practice of not cancelling flights and had previously never dealt with extremely long, on-board delays. JetBlue was optimistic based on weather forecasts that the weather would break and eventually its flights would be able to depart. However, the break in the weather never materialized on February 14, and JetBlue personnel became overwhelmed with the sheer number of arriving and departing aircraft on the ground at the same time, with no gates available for deplaning passengers on flight arrivals.

Our review of the February 14 events focused on JetBlue flights that experienced the worst tarmac delays at or traveling to JFK. As shown in table 5, 26 flights were on the tarmac for 4 hours or more, with 14 flights exceeding 6 hours. Eight of the flights were arrivals, with the worst on-board delay lasting over 9 hours. The remaining 18 were departing flights, with the worst on-board delay exceeding 10 hours. Eight of the departing flights eventually took off but the other 10 were finally cancelled.

## **Findings**

**Table 5. Length and Outcome of JetBlue's Long, On-Board Delays for Flights at or Traveling to JFK**

Flight Origin City	Length of Delay	Flight Outcome
<b>JFK Arrivals</b>		
Ft. Myers, FL	9+ hours	Deplaned
Nashville, TN	8+ hours	Deplaned
Houston-Hobby, TX	7+ hours	Deplaned
Burbank, CA	Almost 6 hours	Diverted/ arrived JFK same day
Austin, TX	Almost 6 hours	Deplaned
Orlando, FL	5 ¾ hours	Deplaned
Long Beach, CA	5 hours	Diverted/ arrived JFK same day
Oakland, CA	4 ¾ hours	Diverted/ arrived JFK same day
<b>Flight Destination City</b>		
<b>JFK Departures</b>		
Aruba	10 ½ hours	Cancelled
Burbank, CA	9 hours	Cancelled
Cancun, Mexico	Nearly 8 hours	Cancelled
Syracuse, NY	7 ½ hours	Cancelled
Houston-Hobby, TX	7 ¼ hours	Departed
Buffalo, NY	7 ¼ hours	Cancelled
Boston, MA	7 hours	Cancelled
Orlando, FL	Nearly 7 hours	Cancelled
Phoenix, AZ	6 ¾ hours	Cancelled
Burbank, CA	6 ¼ hours	Departed
Ft. Lauderdale, FL	6 ¼ hours	Departed
Tampa, FL	5 ½ hours	Departed
New Orleans, LA	5 ½ hours	Cancelled
Burbank, CA	5 ¼ hours	Departed
Buffalo, NY	5 hours	Departed
Seattle, WA	4 ¾ hours	Departed
Long Beach, CA	4 ½ hours	Cancelled
Phoenix, AZ	4 hours	Departed

Source: OIG

JetBlue did not recover from the effects of February 14 until about 5 days later. While only one runway was open on both February 14 and 15, capacity issues were not a problem because so many of the other air carriers had pre-cancelled their flights. The downstream effect of the February 14 event resulted in JetBlue cancelling 1,204 flights through February 20, or 44 percent of its operations. JetBlue provided passengers with over \$11 million in refunds for this incident.

#### *JetBlue Has Since Instituted a System-Wide Policy Designed To Avoid Long, On-Board Delays*

After the February 14 event, JetBlue set a 5-hour time limit for deplaning passengers delayed on the ground and established procedures to monitor delayed flights. Since then, JetBlue has demonstrated on at least one occasion that it is not

## **Findings**

going to allow passengers to sit on aircraft for long periods of time during massive cancellations. For example, during the March 16, 2007, ice storm, JetBlue cancelled over 200 flights scheduled to fly in and out of JFK.

Also, just a week after the February 14 incident (February 20), and before our March 2007 review, JetBlue published its own customer bill of rights. JetBlue plans to offer compensation in the form of vouchers for flight disruptions, such as cancellations.

### *JetBlue Was Not the Only Airline To Experience Flight Disruptions on February 14, 2007*

While JetBlue received the most publicity for stranding its passengers on the tarmac at JFK on February 14, the weather also affected other airlines there—nearly 97 percent of all scheduled flights at JFK were either delayed, cancelled, or diverted, with over 83 percent of those flights cancelled.

Delta had more flights delayed at JFK than JetBlue on February 14, with 15 arriving flights and 39 departing flights delayed over 1 hour. American had 15 arrival delays and 8 departure delays of over 1 hour. However, the average delay length was worse for JetBlue, as shown in table 6.

**Table 6. Average On-Board Delays on February 14, 2007, at JFK for JetBlue, Delta, and American**

Airline	No. of Flights Delayed > 1 Hour	Average On Board Delay	Longest Delay	No. of Flights with Delays > 3 hours
<b>Arrivals:</b>				
JetBlue	14	4 ½ hours	9 hours	9
Delta	15	2 ½ hours	4 ¼ hours	6
American	15	1 ½ hours	2 ¾ hours	0
<b>Departures:</b>				
JetBlue	29	5 ¾ hours	10 ¼ hours	20
Delta	39	3 ½ hours	7 ¼ hours	19
American	8	1 ½ hours	4 ¼ hours	0

Source: OIG

All of the New York area airports were dramatically affected on February 14, 2007. New York's LaGuardia Airport had 92 percent of its flights either delayed, cancelled, or diverted, and Newark International had 87 percent. While our audit did not examine operations at those airports, it is very likely that passengers on flights operating at these airports experienced long, on-board delays.

## Findings

## **Airline and Airport Contingency Plans Are Still Not Adequate To Handle Long, On-Board Delays**

In response to the Secretary's February 2007 request, we examined airlines' customer service commitments, contracts of carriage, policies, and contingency plans dealing with extended ground delays aboard aircraft. We also reviewed airports' contingency plans. We found that both air carriers' and airports' contingency plans are limited in addressing long, on-board delays. Overall, we found that there has been little improvement from what we reported in 2001—that only a few airlines' contingency plans specified in any detail the efforts planned to get passengers off the aircraft when delayed for extended periods and that airlines had not clearly and consistently defined terms in the 1999 Commitment provision.

In 2001, we examined individual airlines' customer service plans in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the Commitment provision, which states that airlines will:

- (1) make every reasonable effort to provide food, water, restroom facilities, and access to medical treatment for passengers aboard an aircraft that is on the ground for an extended period of time without access to the terminal, as consistent with passenger and employee safety and security concerns and
- (2) prepare contingency plans to address such circumstances and will work with carriers and the airport to share facilities and make gates available in an emergency.

However, as we noted in our 2001 report, the airlines had not clearly and consistently defined terms in the Commitment provision such as “an extended period of time.” We also noted that only a few airlines' contingency plans specify in any detail the efforts that will be made to get passengers off the aircraft when delayed for extended periods, either before departure or after arrival. We recommended that the airlines:

- clarify, in their customer service plans, what is meant by an “extended period of time” and “emergency,” so that passengers will know what they can expect during extended on-aircraft delays.
- ensure that comprehensive customer service contingency plans specify the efforts that will be made to get passengers off the aircraft when delayed for extended periods, either before departure or after arrival.

In response to our 2001 report recommendations, the airlines agreed to:

- clarify the terminology used in their customer service plans for extended delays.

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- establish a task force to coordinate and develop contingency plans with local airports and FAA to deal with lengthy delays.

However, our 2007 review found that airlines still have neither clearly and consistently defined certain terminology in their customer service plans (such as what constitutes an “extended period of time” or a “long, on-board delay”) nor established a viable task force. Our opinion was then, as it is now, that this should be a top-priority area for the airlines when implementing their contingency plans, especially with long, on-board delays on the rise from 2006 to 2007—particularly those exceeding 4 hours.

*Not All Airlines Have Established a Time Limit for On-Board Delays or Clearly and Consistently Defined Certain Terminology*

Few airlines have stated a specific time before efforts will be made to get passengers off the aircraft during long, on-board delays in their customer service commitments, contracts of carriage, policies, and contingency plans that deal with these delays. Prior to the American and JetBlue incidents, only 4 of the 13 airlines reviewed had an established time limit on the duration of tarmac delays (see exhibit B). After these incidents, eight airlines now have a set time limit on delay durations before deplaning passengers but five still do not. Also, seven airlines have not defined either what constitutes an extended period of time for meeting passengers’ essential needs or what constitutes a long, on-board delay before deplaning passengers.

In addition,

- of the airlines that have defined “an extended period of time,” the trigger thresholds for meeting passengers’ essential needs vary from 1 to 3 hours. We think it is unlikely that passengers’ definition of an extended period of time will vary depending upon which airline they are flying. A consistent policy across the airlines would be helpful to passengers.
- of the airlines that have defined what constitutes a “long, on-board delay,” the trigger thresholds for deplaning passengers vary from 1 to 5 hours.

All airlines need to specify in detail the efforts that will be made to get passengers off the aircraft when delayed for extended periods, either before departure or after arrival. Although the airlines formed a task force, the effort never materialized as priorities shifted after September 11, 2001. Our testimony before the House Subcommittee on Aviation in April 2007 recommended that the task force be reconvened, and, to date, there has been no action to do so.

## **Findings**

### *Airports' Contingency Plans Addressing Long, On-Board Delays Are Also Limited*

In addition to examining airline contingency plans for mitigating long, on-board delays as requested, we also examined contingency plans from selected major airports nationwide. We requested contingency plans from 13 airports, including 12 hub airports (see exhibit C). We received plans or responses from all 13 airports and found the following:

- Only two airports have a process for monitoring and mitigating long, on-board delays that involves contacting the airline to request a plan of action after an aircraft has remained for 2 hours on the tarmac.
- Airports intervene only upon an airline's request primarily because they do not have the authority to interfere with a carrier's operations during long, on-board delays.
- Most plans address assisting airlines, when assistance is requested, during long, on-board delays. This includes providing gates to deplane passengers or, when a gate is not available, deplaning passengers using mobile air stairs, loading them onto buses, and returning to the terminal.

Based on discussions with airline personnel, it appears that in the recent events that stranded passengers for extraordinarily long periods there was not a coordinated effort by the airlines, airport operators, and FAA to deal with such events.

In our opinion, airport operators need to become more involved in contingency planning for extraordinary flight disruptions, including long, on-board delays during extreme weather or any other disruptive event. Airports are public agencies heavily supported by Federal funding to provide better service to the public. As recipients of Federal funds for airport improvement projects, airports have an obligation to increase airport efficiency, decrease delays, and transport passengers in the most efficient manner.

Also, air travelers can still choose which connecting airport to fly through to get to their final destinations or take direct flights to avoid chronically delayed airports all together. If certain airports continue to maintain a reputation for long flight and tarmac delays, passengers may simply choose other airports whenever possible.

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In our view, large- and medium-hub airport<sup>11</sup> operators should establish a process for monitoring and mitigating long, on-board delays that involves contacting the airline to request a plan of action after an aircraft has remained for 2 hours on the tarmac. As part of the plan, the airport operators need to work with the airlines to ensure that the airlines' deplaning policies are adhered to. Absent any airline policy, the airport operators should work with airlines to establish policies for deplaning passengers and ensure that these policies are adhered to.

### **Ongoing Actions for Mitigating Long, On-Board Delays**

Secretary Peters asked that we highlight some of the best practices we found that could help in dealing with long, on-board delays. During our review of selected airlines and airports, we found several practices by some airlines and airports to mitigate the effects of these occurrences. Also, after our review began, some airports moved forward with other initiatives meant to assist the airlines in dealing with long, on-board delays. In addition, ATA announced a new initiative for dealing with such situations. FAA also expanded an existing initiative this summer to other parts of the National Airspace System to reduce the amount of time that flights sit on tarmacs waiting to depart. We have included these actions along with best practices identified during our review to provide an overall picture of the actions being taken across the industry that relate to the Secretary's concerns.

#### *Airlines' and Airports' Best Practices and Ongoing Initiatives*

**Best Practices:** The best practices we identified during our review include the following:

- Setting the maximum amount of time that passengers will remain on-board aircraft before deplaning them. An airline's local contingency planning at one airport is to do everything reasonably possible to ensure that passengers do not remain on board aircraft for more than 1 hour.
- "Intelligent cancelling"—cancelling flights most likely to be affected by the weather event without being too optimistic or pessimistic. Pre-cancelling flights before the passengers leave home keeps them away from the airport, thus reducing congestion. There are trade-offs when implementing this practice—passengers avoid experiencing long, on-board delays, but they need to be re-accommodated on later flights, optimally that same day. However,

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<sup>11</sup> FAA defines (1) large hubs as those airports that each account for at least 1 percent of the total U.S. passenger enplanements and (2) medium hubs as those airports that each account for between .025 percent and 1 percent of the total passenger enplanements. Large-hub airports (30 in total) account for 69 percent of all passenger enplanements, while medium-hub airports (37 in total) account for 20 percent of all enplanements.

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reduced capacity and higher load factors can result in increased passenger inconvenience and dissatisfaction with customer service. With more seats filled, air carriers have fewer options to accommodate passengers from cancelled flights.

- Keeping gate space available for off-loading passengers in times of irregular operations. This could be done by the airport authority or the carriers. The gate would be available for arriving aircraft and solely for deplaning passengers.
- Implementing programs that provide volunteer employees from throughout the airline's system that are flown or driven to the destination needing assistance. These volunteers (i.e., customer service agents) act as additional help during irregular operations. The goal of the agents would be to separate and service passengers needing to be rebooked from those passengers arriving at the airport already ticketed for on-time flights or non-cancelled, operating flights.
- Implementing flexible staffing arrangements and periodic duty rotations to meet the challenges during irregular operations. For example, certain non-customer service employees have been cross-trained to assist in re-booking passengers whose flights have been cancelled.
- Holding teleconferences before a known weather event (e.g., winter storm, hurricane, tropical depression, etc.) with potentially affected airports' general managers. In addition to asking for recommendations from the general managers, they discuss the status of snow removal equipment, liquid de-icing amounts/availability, staffing, and possible scheduled operation (aircraft and passenger) reductions. Similar meetings are already held between FAA and airlines.
- Using the Aircraft Communication Addressing and Reporting System (equipped on most commercial aircraft) to send a message to the airline's Operations Control Center notifying the Center that the aircraft has been off the gate for more than 3 hours without departing.
- Constantly monitoring aircraft on the tarmac; in cases of aircraft remaining for more than 2 hours, airport staff will contact the appropriate airline manager to coordinate the aircraft's return to a gate. If necessary, airport staff will assist in deplaning an aircraft and provide an escort, buses, and mobile stairs. Finally, staff will ensure that airport services (e.g., concessions, security, and ground transportation) remain open during an irregular operation.

The best practices we identified during our review are not all-inclusive, and the airlines or airports should consider incorporating them into their ongoing

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operations, especially the best practice of setting the maximum amount of time that passengers will remain on board aircraft before deplaning.

However, in our opinion, a more comprehensive national plan of action is needed to prevent and mitigate long, on-board delays and should involve collaboration among airlines, airports, FAA, and DOT. Therefore, a national task force of representatives from each of these groups should be established to develop and coordinate contingency plans to deal with lengthy delays. Although the airlines formed a task force in response to our 2001 report recommendations, the effort never materialized as priorities shifted after September 11, 2001. Now is the time to reconvene the task force.

**Airports' Ongoing Initiatives To Address Long, On-Board Delays:** During our review, two major airport operators put forth initiatives to address long, on-board delays. The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey set up a task force to find ways to reduce flight delays at the region's three main airports. The Port Authority; which operates JFK, LaGuardia, and Newark Liberty International Airports; leads the group. The task force includes airline executives and Federal, state, and city government officials.

The task force convened its first meeting July 18, 2007, with 42 airline executives and Federal, state, and city government officials attending, including then FAA Administrator Blakey. The task force met a second time on September 18, and another meeting is scheduled for November 2007; conference calls are planned to occur periodically. The task force plans to issue a report by the end of 2007.

The task force is addressing two main areas—technical issues and customer service. In the technical area, the Port Authority and FAA are working on procedural improvements, such as more efficient use of the runways at JFK. Also, work is being delegated to the airlines that are looking into ways that airports could be changed to reduce flight delays. In the customer service area, the focus is on best methods for getting passengers off aircraft and enhancements for reducing the amount of time they are kept on aircraft.

Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport is moving forward with a plan to cut gate delays for arriving passengers by busing people from planes directly to concourses when airline gates are full. The city of Atlanta, which operates the airport, approved a \$2.5 million proposal for 4 new buses that can transport about 80 passengers and their carry-on luggage. The plan also includes sets of mobile stairways that allow passengers to leave planes and another vehicle to help disabled passengers. Airlines requesting the service will reimburse the city for the use of the buses.

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It is encouraging to see that some airport operators are becoming more involved in mitigating long, on-board delays. However, as passenger traffic continues to grow, airports will need to become more proactive in dealing with long, on-board delays, especially those airports with limited airfield or gate capacity. Airports will also need to proactively deal with in-terminal delays when multiple flights are cancelled and passengers are stranded in the gate areas where terminal capacity could be limited.

### *ATA Initiative To Address Long, On-Board Delays*

On February 22, 2007, ATA announced an initiative for dealing with long, on-board delays and proposed the following course of action:

- Each airline will continue to review and update its policies to ensure the safety, security, and comfort of customers.
- Each airline will work with FAA to allow long-delayed flights to return to terminals in order to off-load passengers who choose to disembark without losing that flight's position in the departure sequence.
- ATA will ask the Department to review airline and airport emergency contingency plans to ensure that the plans effectively address weather emergencies in a coordinated manner and provide passengers with essential needs (i.e., food, water, lavatory facilities, and medical services).
- ATA will ask the Department to promptly convene a meeting of air carrier, airport, and FAA representatives to discuss procedures to better respond to weather emergencies that result in lengthy flight delays.

While we understand the current pressures that ATA and its member airlines face in maintaining profitability, we are concerned that the actions proposed merely shift responsibility from ATA to the Department. We agree that the Department must be an active partner, but ATA's proposed course of action is not significantly different than what the airlines agreed to do in response to our 2001 recommendations, such as "to establish a task force to coordinate and develop contingency plans with local airports and FAA to deal with lengthy delays."

### *FAA's Expanded Program To Reduce Flight Delays*

FAA is also taking action to minimize delays; the Agency expanded an existing initiative this summer to other parts of the National Airspace System to reduce the amount of time that flights sit on tarmacs waiting to depart. This initiative, known as the Airspace Flow Program, gives FAA and the airlines the capability to maximize the overall use of the National Airspace System while minimizing

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delays and congestion. These efforts, which are managed by FAA's Command Center, do not create additional capacity but limit the negative effects of bad weather. For instance, it gives airlines the option of either accepting delays for flights scheduled to fly through storms or flying longer routes to safely maneuver around them.

The Agency successfully launched the program last year at seven locations in the Northeast. According to FAA, on bad weather days at major airports in the region, delays fell by 9 percent compared to the year before. Cost savings for the airlines and the flying public from the program were estimated to be \$100 million annually. The number of Airspace Flow Program locations—chosen for their combination of heavy traffic and frequent bad weather—was expanded from 7 to 18. The additional locations will ease delays for passengers flying through the southern and midwestern United States and for those on transcontinental flights.

In the past, severe storms often forced FAA to ground flights at affected airports. This “penalized” flights whose scheduled paths would have taken them around the storm had they not been grounded with the flights directly affected by the storms. The Airspace Flow Program allows FAA to manage traffic fairly and efficiently by identifying only those flights scheduled to fly through storms and giving them estimated departure times. Airspace Flow Programs will also be used in conditions not related to weather, such as severe congestion near major cities.

In another development, the Agency rolled out a new software program that is intended to ensure that airports affected by bad weather receive the maximum number of flights that can safely fly to them. During storms, arrival slots often open up due to delayed or cancelled flights. The new software program, called Adaptive Compression, would automatically fill those slots with the next available flight. The software tool, which was launched in March 2007, is intended to reduce delays, saving time and money for the airlines and passengers.

While it is too soon to evaluate the effectiveness of these ongoing initiatives, they all have merit and, if properly executed, should help in mitigating long, on-board delays in the immediate term.

### **DOT, FAA, Airlines, and Airports Should Complete Actions on Outstanding Recommendations To Improve Airline Customer Service and Minimize Long, On-Board Delays**

Given the events of this past winter, DOT should take a more active role in overseeing customer service issues, and there are actions that the Department, the airlines, airports, and FAA can undertake immediately to do so. Many of the actions are not new and date back to recommendations in our 2001 report, which were directed at delay and cancellation problems—key drivers of customer

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dissatisfaction with airlines. To improve the accountability, enforcement, and protection afforded to air travelers we recommend the following.

### *Actions Needed From the Airlines and Airports*

- **Clarify delay terminology and set limits for delay durations before deplaning passengers.** Those airlines who have not already done so must: (1) define what constitutes an extended period of time for meeting passengers' essential needs, (2) set a time limit on long, on-board delay durations before deplaning passengers, and (3) incorporate such policies in their contracts of carriage and post them on their Internet site. We recommended most of these actions in 2001, and the airlines agreed and stated plans to implement them.

We realize that certain procedures may need to be tailored to individual airlines and airports and will heavily depend on the situation (e.g., setting a time limit on delay durations before returning to a gate or, when a gate is not available, deplaning passengers using mobile air stairs, loading them onto buses, and returning to the terminal). There may be situations or conditions that make it difficult to bring passengers back to a gate during long, on-board delays. Some of the main obstacles to this are the physical layouts of the airports. Some airports, by virtue of their design and modern facilities, may be able to safely accommodate aircraft movement. Other airports, because of their layout design (narrow taxiways), may not be able to accommodate aircraft moving about and off-loading passengers safely.

Also, weather factors can limit off-loading options. For example, deplaning passengers onto metal mobile stairs is not feasible during a lightning storm. Likewise, it may not be necessary to deplane passengers at JFK after 2 hours, since typical Friday afternoon delays normally last that long. However, a 2-hour, on-board delay at Austin might require deplaning activities to commence. Airlines and airports need to work together to determine the various situations that can occur and devise plans for handling those occurrences.

- **Establish specific targets for reducing chronically delayed or cancelled flights.**<sup>12</sup> In our 2001 report, we recommended that the airlines establish in the Commitment and their Customer Service Plans targets for reducing the number of flights chronically delayed (i.e., 30 minutes or longer) or cancelled 40 percent or more of the time.

In response to our recommendation, the airlines stated they were “willing to accept the challenge of reducing chronically delayed or cancelled flights, for

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<sup>12</sup> We define chronically delayed or cancelled flights as those flights delayed 30 minutes or longer or cancelled at least 40 percent of the time during a single month.

factors we can control, in order to relieve unneeded and unwanted passenger frustration.” However, there were no actions identified on how or when the airlines would go about implementing this challenge. After September 11, 2001, their focus shifted, but the problem has returned and must be resolved.

- **Disclose on-time flight performance.** We recommended in our 2001 report that the airlines disclose to customers at the time of booking, without being asked, the prior month’s on-time performance rate for those flights that have been delayed (i.e., 30 minutes or longer) or cancelled 40 percent or more of the time. Currently, the airlines are required to disclose on-time performance only upon request from the customer.

The ATA airlines disagreed with this recommendation and, as an alternative, agreed to make on-time performance data accessible to customers on the airlines’ Internet sites, on a link to the BTS Internet site, or through toll-free telephone reservation systems.

However, in our 2006 review,<sup>13</sup> only 5 of the 16 airlines we reviewed made on-time performance data available on their Internet sites. Given the ease of availability of this information to the airlines, we continue to believe that airlines should post on-time flight performance information on their Internet sites and make it available through their telephone reservation systems without being prompted.

- **Resume efforts to self-audit their customer service plans.** We also recommended in 2001 that the airlines establish quality assurance and performance measurement systems and conduct internal audits to measure compliance with the Commitment provisions and customer service plans. The ATA airlines agreed with the recommendation.

In June 2001, we confirmed that 12 of the 14 ATA airlines that were signatories to the Commitment had established and implemented their quality assurance and performance measurement systems. In our 2006 review, however, we found that the quality assurance and performance measurement systems were being implemented at just five of the ATA airlines. The other ATA airlines had either discontinued their systems after September 11, 2001, or combined them with operations or financial performance reviews where the Commitment provisions were overshadowed by those issues.

The key to the success of the airlines’ new policies designed to prevent on-board delays is for each airline to (1) have a credible tracking system for

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<sup>13</sup> OIG Report Number AV-2007-012, “Follow-Up Review: Performance of U.S. Airlines in Implementing Selected Provisions of the Airline Customer Service Commitment,” November 21, 2006.

compliance with its new policy and with all other Commitment provisions and (2) implement its customer service plan, reinforcing it with performance goals and measures.

These systems and audit procedures will also help DOT to more efficiently review the airlines' compliance with the Commitment provisions and ensure that airlines comply with their policies governing long, on-board delays, especially in the event that health and safety hazards arise from such delays.

- **Reconvene the task force.** In response to our 2001 report recommendations, the airlines agreed to establish a task force of representatives from airlines, airports, and FAA to develop and coordinate contingency plans to deal with lengthy delays, such as working with carriers and the airports to share facilities and make gates available in an emergency. Although the airlines formed a task force, the effort never materialized because their priorities shifted after September 11, 2001. In our testimony before the House Subcommittee on Aviation in April 2007, we recommended that the task force be reconvened, to date, there still has been no action to do so. Now is the time for airlines to reconvene a national task force and develop and coordinate contingency plans with local airports and FAA to deal with lengthy delays.
- **Implement processes for monitoring lengthy delays.** Large- and medium-hub airport operators should establish a process for monitoring and mitigating long, on-board delays that involves contacting the airline to request a plan of action after an aircraft has remained on the tarmac for 2 hours. As part of the plan, the airport operators need to work with the airlines to ensure that the airlines' deplaning policies are adhered to. Absent any airline policy, the airports should establish their own policies for deplaning passengers.

#### *Actions Needed From DOT*

- **Implement the necessary changes in the airlines' on-time performance reporting to capture all long, on board delays.** Under 14 Code of Federal Regulations Part 234, "Airline Service Quality Performance Reports," air carriers that account for at least 1 percent of domestic scheduled passenger revenues must submit monthly reports to the BTS that include, among other things, the number of (1) flights that departed and arrived on time by airport; (2) flights delayed, cancelled, and diverted; and (3) flights delayed or cancelled by cause.

However, the delay statistics (see statistics reflected in table 1 on page v) do not accurately portray the magnitude of long, on-board delays because carriers are not required to report a delay if the flight is cancelled or diverted. For example, if a flight taxis out, sits for hours, and then taxis back in and is

## **Findings**



cancelled, the cancellation is recorded but the delay is not. Therefore, there is no record of how long a flight remained at the gate or sat on the tarmac before it was cancelled. This was the case with some JetBlue flights at JFK on February 14, 2007. Also, if a flight is diverted to an airport other than the destination airport and sits on the tarmac for an extended period of time, the flight is not recorded in delay statistics. This was the case with American's flights that were diverted to Austin on December 29, 2006.

BTS is looking into whether changes are needed in how the airlines record long, on-board delays. BTS should make this a priority and implement the necessary changes in the airlines' on-time performance reporting requirements to capture all events resulting in long, on-board delays, such as flight diversions and cancellations.

- **Conduct incident investigations involving long, on-board delays.** Also, based on the results of this review, the Department's Office of General Counsel—in collaboration with FAA, airlines, and airports—should review incidents involving long, on-board ground delays and their causes; identify trends and patterns of such events; and implement workable solutions for mitigating extraordinary flight disruptions.
- **Oversee the airlines' policies for dealing with long, on-board delays.** The Office of Aviation Enforcement and Proceedings should ensure that airlines comply with their policies governing long, on-board delays, especially in the event that health and safety hazards arise from such delays, and advise Congress if the airlines retreat from the Commitment provisions or dilute the language in the current contracts of carriage.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to improve the accountability, enforcement, and the protection afforded to air travelers, we are making the following recommendations to the Secretary of Transportation:

1. Require each certificated and commuter airline that provides domestic scheduled service using any aircraft with more than 30 passenger seats to (a) define what constitutes an extended period of time; (b) set a time limit on delay durations before deplaning passengers; and (c) incorporate such policies in its contract of carriage and post on its Internet site.
2. Require all airlines that report on-time performance to DOT pursuant to 14 CFR Part 234 to establish specific targets for reducing chronically delayed or cancelled flights.

### Recommendations

3. Require all airlines that report on-time performance to DOT pursuant to 14 CFR Part 234 to post on-time flight performance information on their Internet sites.
4. Require all airlines that report on-time performance to DOT pursuant to 14 CFR Part 234 to disclose to customers at the time of booking, without being asked, the prior month's on-time performance rate for those flights that have been delayed (i.e., for 30 minutes or longer) or cancelled 40 percent or more of the time.
5. Require each certificated and commuter airline that provides domestic scheduled service using any aircraft with more than 30 passenger seats to self-audit their customer service plans.
6. Require large- and medium-hub airport operators to establish and implement a process for monitoring and mitigating long, on-board delays that involves contacting the airline to request a plan of action after an aircraft has remained for 2 hours on the tarmac.
7. Establish a national task force of airlines, airports, and FAA to coordinate and develop contingency plans to deal with lengthy delays, such as working with carriers and the airport to share facilities and make gates available in an emergency.
8. Require BTS to implement the necessary changes in the airlines' on-time performance reporting requirements to capture all events resulting in long, on-board delays, such as flight diversions.
9. In collaboration with FAA, airlines, and airports, review incidents involving long, on-board ground delays and their causes; identify trends and patterns of such events; and implement workable solutions for mitigating extraordinary flight disruptions.
10. Direct the Office of Aviation Enforcement and Proceedings to ensure that airlines comply with their public policies governing long, on-board delays, especially in the event that health and safety hazards arise from such delays, and advise Congress if the airlines retreat from such policies.

## **Recommendations**

## **EXHIBIT A. OBJECTIVES, SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY, AND RELATED AUDIT COVERAGE**

### **Objectives**

On February 26, 2007, Secretary Peters requested that the Office of Inspector General (OIG) examine the airlines' customer service plans, contracts of carriage, and internal policies dealing with long, on-board delays and the specific incidents involving American Airlines and JetBlue Airways when passengers were stranded on board aircraft for extended periods of time. She also requested that we provide recommendations on what actions should be taken to prevent a recurrence of such events.

Consistent with Secretary Peter's request, we (1) looked into the specific situations involving American and JetBlue, in light of whatever specific commitment these carriers made concerning policies and practices for meeting customers' essential needs during long on-board delays; (2) examined the airlines' customer service commitments, contracts of carriage, and policies dealing with extended ground delays aboard aircraft; and (3) provided recommendations as to what, if anything, the airlines, airports, or the Government, including the Department, might do to prevent a recurrence of such events, highlighting any "best practices" discovered by the industry in dealing with such situations.

### **Scope and Methodology**

We conducted this review between March 2007 and September 2007. The audit was conducted in accordance with Government Auditing Standards prescribed by the Comptroller General of the United States and included such tests as we considered necessary to provide reasonable assurance of detecting abuse or illegal acts. In conducting this review, we relied on computer-generated data from the airlines and did not access the general and application controls for each of the automated systems.

To examine the airlines' customer service commitments, contracts of carriage, and policies dealing with extended ground delays aboard aircraft we obtained the customer service plans and contracts of carriage from the Air Transport Association member airlines. We reviewed these documents in particular for references related to the airlines' handling of long on-board delays and essential needs of the passengers. We also obtained and reviewed 13 airports' policies dealing with extended ground delays from selected Airports Council International-North America member airports. We reviewed these documents in particular for

references related to the airports monitoring and assisting in handling long, on-board delays.

To evaluate the specific situations involving American and JetBlue, we visited JetBlue Airways' headquarters in New York (including JFK) and American Airlines' in Texas—specifically, Dallas-Fort Worth International and Austin-Bergstrom Airports. We reviewed information and data from American and JetBlue regarding the events of December 29, 2006, and February 14, 2007. We also received information from other carriers providing service from Dallas-Fort Worth, Austin, and New York airports and met with officials from FAA air traffic control and those three airports.

### **Related Audit and Testimony Coverage**

In the past 7 years, OIG has performed a number of customer service-related audits and testimonies. We issued our most recent update in April 2007.

**Report AV-2000-102, “Interim Report on Airline Customer Service Commitment,” June 27, 2000.** The June 2000 report provided the 6-month progress of the airlines in implementing their customer service plans. The Interim Report provided the preliminary results and observations on the airlines' systems to measure performance against their plans, discussed the airlines' contracts of carriage in relation to their plans, provided observations of the Department's capacity to enforce consumer protection rights, and discussed the importance of customer service in the marketplace.

**Report AV-2001-020, “Final Report on Airline Customer Service Commitment,” February 12, 2001 and Testimony CC-2001-090, “Airline Customer Service Commitment,” on February 13, 2001.** In this final report and testimony, we reported that the airlines were making progress toward meeting their Customer Service Commitment and that the Commitment has been a plus for air travelers. Notwithstanding progress by the airlines toward meeting their Commitment, we found significant shortfalls in reliable and timely communication with passengers by the Airlines about flight delays and cancellations. Further, we found the airlines' Commitment does not directly address the most deep-seated, underlying 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.

**Testimony CC-2001-217, “Status Report on Airline Customer Service,” June 20, 2001.** In June 2001, the OIG presented testimony before the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, Subcommittee on Aviation regarding progress made by 14 airlines in improving customer service since our 2001 report. We reported that most airlines had: (1) incorporated the original

### **Exhibit A. Objectives, Scope and Methodology, and Related Audit Coverage**

Airline Customer Service Commitment into their contracts of carriage, (2) established performance measurement systems, and (3) petitioned the Department to revise regulations for reporting mishandled baggage and compensating passengers involuntarily bumped from a flight. The 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. There were several important recommendations that the airlines did not address, such as petitioning the Department to require that each airline with a frequent flyer program make available to the public a more comprehensive reporting of frequent flyer redemption information in its frequent flyer literature and annual reports (e.g., the percentage of successful redemptions and frequent flyer seats made available in the airline's top origin and destination markets).

**Report SC-2005-051, "Review of December 2004 Holiday Air Travel Disruptions," February 28, 2005.** 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. 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 approximately 269,000 passenger itineraries. 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 cancelled 405 flights during the holiday travel period, affecting more than 46,000 passengers and delayed over 3,900 flights affecting over 518,000 passengers.

**Report AV-2007-012, "Follow-Up Review: Performance of U.S. Airlines in Implementing Selected Provisions of the Airline Customer Service Commitment," November 21, 2006.** In the 2006 follow-up review, we reported that the airlines' customer service plans were still in place to carry out the provisions of the Commitment and that the Commitment provisions were still incorporated in their contracts of carriage, as we recommended in our prior review.

We found that the airlines needed 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.

**Exhibit A. Objectives, Scope and Methodology, and Related Audit Coverage**

We also found that the Department was using its additional resources to oversee and enforce air travel consumer protection requirements with a focus on investigations and enforcement of civil rights issues, including complaints from passengers with disabilities. However, when the Department discovered violations and assesses penalties, it almost always forgave a portion of the penalty if the air carrier agreed to mitigate the conditions and remain in future compliance with the rule for which the penalty was assessed. The Department's follow-up monitoring of compliance with these conditions was limited, and in some cases there was no follow-up monitoring by the Department.

**Testimony CC-2007-042, "Refocusing Efforts To Improve Airline Customer Service," April 11, 2007.** In April 2007, the OIG presented testimony to the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation reporting that the airlines continue to face challenges in mitigating extraordinary flight disruptions, including long, on-board delays during extreme weather. The airlines, FAA, and the Department cannot prevent significant weather events. What they can do, however, is work together to plan for such events and minimize the impact on passengers.

However, there are actions that the airlines, airports, the Department, and FAA could undertake immediately without being prompted by Congress to do so. For example:

- Those airlines that have not already done so should implement quality assurance and performance measurement systems and conduct internal audits of their compliance with the Commitment provisions. The Department should use these systems to more efficiently review the airlines' compliance with those Commitment provisions governed by Federal regulation.
- The Department should revisit its current position on chronic delays and cancellations and take enforcement actions against air carriers that consistently advertise flight schedules that are unrealistic, regardless of the reason.
- The airlines, airports, and FAA should establish a task force to coordinate and develop contingency plans to deal with lengthy delays, such as working with carriers and the airport to share facilities and make gates available in an emergency.
- The Department's Office of General Counsel; in collaboration with FAA, airlines, and airports; should review incidents involving long, on-board ground delays and their causes; identify trends and patterns of such events; and implement workable solutions for mitigating extraordinary flight disruptions.

**Testimony CC-2007-046, "Actions Needed To Improve Airline Customer Service," April 20, 2007.** In April 2007, the OIG presented testimony before the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, Subcommittee on Aviation

**Exhibit A. Objectives, Scope and Methodology, and Related Audit Coverage**

reporting that the airlines continue to face challenges in mitigating extraordinary flight disruptions, including long, on-board delays during extreme weather. Similar recommendations were provided to the House committee as were presented to the Senate committee the week before.

**EXHIBIT B. SELECTED AIRLINES' TERMS AND CONDITIONS  
FOR HANDLING LONG, ON-BOARD DELAYS**

<b>Airline</b>	<b>Definition of Extended Period of Time Stated in Customer Service Plans and/or Contracts of Carriage</b>	<b>Time to Deplane Stated in Customer Service Plans and/or Contracts of Carriage and/or Defined by Internal Policies (I)</b>
Alaska	90 Minutes	2 Hours for Arrivals
Aloha	None	None
American	2 Hours	4 Hours (I) (as of 4/10/07)
ATA	1 Hour for Beverages 4 Hours for Catering	None
Continental	2 Hours	4 Hours for Departures (as of 6/15/07)
Delta	None	None
Hawaiian	2 Hours	2 Hours (as of 8/01/01)
JetBlue	None	5 Hours (as of 2/20/07)
Midwest	None	None
Northwest	1 Hour for Arrivals 3 Hours for Departures	1 Hour for Arrivals 3 Hours for Departures
Southwest	2 Hours	2 Hours
United	None	1½ Hours for Arrivals 4 Hours for Departures (as of 9/05/07)
US Airways	2 Hours	None



## EXHIBIT C. SELECTED AIRPORTS' POLICIES FOR ASSISTING IN LONG, ON-BOARD DELAYS

Airport	Plan to Deplane Passengers	Airport Policy*
Seattle-Tacoma International	Yes	Determine remote parking locations for aircraft to deplane passengers and provide buses if requested.
Dallas/Fort Worth International	Yes	Monitor length of time hold positions of aircraft. If over 2 hours, coordinate aircraft return to gate.
Austin/Bergstrom International	No	Determine parking spots of diverted aircraft.
Indianapolis International	Yes	Provide available gate or remotely deplane passengers to buses upon request.
George Bush Intercontinental	Yes	Provide buses when requested.
Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International	Yes	Provide mobile lounges to take passengers to gate when requested by airlines.
Honolulu International	No	Encourage carriers to off-load passengers and offer immediate assistance by, among other things, offering use of available airport facilities.
John F. Kennedy International (New York)	Yes	After 2 hours and upon request, help to find alternate airport locations to safely deplane passengers.
General Mitchell International (Milwaukee)	Yes	Provide buses when requested.
Minneapolis-St. Paul International	Yes	Provide air stairs and buses to deplane passengers when requested.
Dallas Love Field	Yes	Provide emergency services upon request.
Chicago O'Hare International	No	Monitor length of time hold positions of aircraft.
Phoenix Sky Harbor International	Yes	Help with deplanements via jet bridge or remote hardstand and provide buses to transport passengers.

\*The policies listed in the table are not all inclusive; these are highlights from the airports' contingency plans for dealing with long, on-board delays.

**EXHIBIT D. STAKEHOLDERS VISITED OR CONTACTED**

<b>Airlines Visited</b>	<b>Airlines Contacted</b>
American Airlines Headquarters, Ft. Worth, TX DFW International Airport, TX Austin-Bergstrom International, TX JFK International Airport, NY	Alaska Airlines Aloha Airlines American Airlines ATA Airlines Continental Airlines Delta Air Lines Hawaiian Airlines JetBlue Airways Midwest Airlines Northwest Airlines Southwest Airlines United Airlines US Airways
JetBlue Airways Headquarters, Forest Hills, NY JFK International Airport, NY	N/A
Southwest Airlines Dallas-Love Field, TX Austin-Bergstrom International, TX	N/A
United Airlines DFW International Airport, TX JFK International Airport, NY	N/A
Continental Airlines Austin-Bergstrom International, TX	N/A
Delta Airlines JFK International Airport, NY	N/A
<b>Airports Visited</b>	<b>Airports Contacted</b>
Dallas/Fort Worth International City of Austin Aviation Department Austin-Bergstrom International, Austin, TX Port Authority of New York and New Jersey John F. Kennedy International, Jamaica, NY	Chicago O'Hare International Dallas Love Field General Mitchell International (Milwaukee) George Bush Intercontinental (Houston) Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Honolulu International Indianapolis International Minneapolis-St. Paul International Phoenix Sky Harbor International Seattle-Tacoma International
<b>FAA ATC Facilities Visited or Contacted</b>	<b>Trade Associations Contacted</b>
DFW Air Traffic Control Tower, DFW Airport, TX Air Route Traffic Control Center, Fort Worth, TX Austin Air Traffic Control Tower, Austin, TX Air Traffic Systems Operations, Tactical Operations Northeast United States, Jamaica, NY JFK Air Traffic Control Tower, Jamaica, NY	Air Transport Association, Washington D.C. Airports Council International-North America, Washington D.C. Airline Pilots Association, Washington D.C. Association of Flight Attendants, Washington D.C.

**APPENDIX. DEPARTMENT COMMENTS**

THE SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20590

September 24, 2007

**MEMORANDUM TO:** Calvin L. Scovel, III

**FROM:** Mary E. Peters *mp*

**SUBJECT:** Response to OIG Recommendations for Minimizing Lengthy, On-Board Flight Delays

I appreciate the hard work of the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) in preparing its report titled "Actions Needed to Minimize Lengthy, On-Board Flight Delays." This report was in response to my February 26, 2007, request that, among other things, you examine carrier policies regarding extended on-ground delays and recommend actions the airlines, airports, or the government (including the Department) can take to prevent incidents in which passengers are stranded on board aircraft for extended periods of time. It goes without saying that lengthy, on-board flight delays are inconvenient to all concerned and can be frustrating and stressful for passengers. I am fully committed to improving the air travel environment for passengers. Toward that end, I have directed DOT staff to carefully consider the recommendations in your report, including those for improving the information provided the public and the manner in which passengers are treated, including compliance by carriers with their own policies.

The following pages contain textual versions of the graphs and charts found in this document. These pages were not in the original document but have been added here to accommodate assistive technology.

## **Actions Needed To Minimize Long, On-Board Flight Delays**

### **508 Compliant Presentation**

**Figure 1. Provisions of the Airline Customer Service Commitment**

- Offer the lowest fare available.
- Notify customers of known delays, cancellations, and diversions.
- Deliver baggage on time.
- Support an increase in the baggage liability limit.
- Allow reservations to be held or cancelled.
- Provide prompt ticket refunds.
- Properly accommodate disabled and special-needs passengers.
- Meet customers' essential needs during long, on-aircraft delays.
- Handle "bumped" passengers with fairness and consistency.
- Disclose travel itinerary, cancellation policies, frequent flyer rules, and aircraft configuration.
- Ensure good customer service from code-share partners.
- Be more responsive to customer complaints.

Source: Airline Customer Service Commitment, June 1999

**Figure 2. Percent of Flights Delayed, Cancelled, or Diverted for Years 2000 to 2007**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
For year 2000	27.4 percent
For year 2001	22.6 percent
For year 2002	17.9 percent
For year 2003	18.0 percent
For year 2004	21.9 percent
For year 2005	22.6 percent
For year 2006	24.6 percent
For year 2007	27.8 percent

Note: The percentage given for the year 2007 is based on January to July data.

Source: Bureau of Transportation Statistics data

**Figure 3. Average Length of Arrival Delays for Years 2000 to 2007**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Minutes</b>
For year 2000	52.5 minutes
For year 2001	49.2 minutes
For year 2002	46.8 minutes
For year 2003	48.9 minutes
For year 2004	51.4 minutes
For year 2005	52.2 minutes
For year 2006	54.0 minutes
For year 2007	56.7 minutes

Note: The minutes of arrival delays given for the year 2007 is based on January to July data.

Source: Bureau of Transportation Statistics data

**Table 1. Number of Flights With Long, On-Board Tarmac Delays of 1 to 5 Hours or Longer for January Through July of 2006 and 2007**

- In the first 7 months of 2006, there were 33,438 flights with on-board, tarmac delays of 1 to 2 hours. In the first 7 months of 2007, there were 47,558. This represents a 42.23 percent change.
- In the first 7 months of 2006, there were 3,781 flights with on-board, tarmac delays of 2 to 3 hours. In the first 7 months of 2007, there were 5,213. This represents a 37.87 percent change.
- In the first 7 months of 2006, there were 710 flights with on-board, tarmac delays of 3 to 4 hours. In the first 7 months of 2007, there were 1,025. This represents a 44.37 percent change.
- In the first 7 months of 2006, there were 120 flights with on-board, tarmac delays of 4 to 5 hours. In the first 7 months of 2007, there were 189. This represents a 57.50 percent change.
- In the first 7 months of 2006, there were 27 flights with on-board, tarmac delays of 5 hours or longer. In the first 7 months of 2007, there were 44. This represents a 62.96 percent change.

The total number of flights with long, on-board tarmac delays of 1 to 5 hours or longer for January through July of 2006 was 38,076. The total number of flights with long, on-board tarmac delays of 1 to 5 hours or longer for January through July of 2007 was 54,029. This represents a 41.90 percent increase.

Source: Office of Inspector General analysis based on Bureau of Transportation Statistics data

**Figure 4. Air Travel Consumer Complaints, 2006**

<b>Complaint</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Flight Problems	Accounted for 29 percent of complaints.
Baggage	Accounted for 22 percent of complaints.
Customer Care	Accounted for 13 percent of complaints.
Reservations, Ticketing, and Boarding	Accounted for 11 percent of complaints.
Refunds	Accounted for 7 percent of complaints.
Disability	Accounted for 6 percent of complaints.
Others	Accounted for 12 percent of complaints.

Source: Department of Transportation Air Travel Consumer Reports for 2006

**Table 2. Seven Airports Accepting Most of American's Diversions (on December 29, 2006)**

<b>Airport</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Number of Diversions</b>
San Antonio Regional Airport	San Antonio, Texas	13 diversions
Shreveport Regional Airport	Shreveport, Louisiana	12 diversions
Adams Field Airport	Little Rock, Arkansas	11 diversions
Will Rogers World Airport	Oklahoma City, Oklahoma	11 diversions
Austin-Bergstrom International Airport	Austin, Texas	11 diversions
Tulsa International Airport	Tulsa, Oklahoma	10 diversions
Midland International Airport	Midland, Texas	10 diversions

These airports accepted a total of 78 American Airlines diverted flights on December 29, 2006.

Source: Office of Inspector General

**Table 3. Length of On-Board Delay and Outcome of the 11 Diverted Flights to Austin**

<b>Flight Origin City and Flight Number</b>	<b>Length of On-Board Delay</b>	<b>Flight Outcome</b>
Flight Number 1348 out of San Francisco, California	On-Board Delay of 9 hours 16 minutes	Flight was diverted, remained overnight, and arrived at DFW the next day.
Flight Number 2412 out of Los Angeles, California	On-Board Delay of 7 hours 14 minutes	Flight was cancelled, rebooked, and arrived at DFW the next day.
Flight Number 1008 out of Oakland, California	On-Board Delay of 7 hours 6 minutes	Flight was diverted, remained overnight, and arrived at DFW the next day.
Flight Number 534 out of Fresno, California	On-Board Delay of 6 hours 8 minutes	Flight was diverted, remained overnight, and arrived at DFW the next day.
Flight Number 2302 out of Seattle, Washington	On-Board Delay of 2 hours 26 minutes	Flight was diverted and then arrived at DFW the same day.
Flight Number 1372 out of Fresno, California	On-Board Delay of 2 hours 16 minutes	Flight was diverted, remained overnight, and arrived at DFW the next day.
Flight Number 330 out of Vancouver, British Columbia	On-Board Delay of 2 hours 8 minutes	Flight was diverted and then arrived at DFW the same day.
Flight Number 1074 out of Salt Lake City, Utah	On-Board Delay of 2 hours 4 minutes	Flight was diverted, remained overnight, and arrived at DFW the next day.
Flight Number 1514 out of San Jose, California	On-Board Delay of 1 hour 39 minutes	Flight was diverted and then arrived at DFW the same day.
Flight Number 592 out of Orange County, California	On-Board Delay of 1 hour 32 minutes	Flight was diverted and then arrived at DFW the same day.
Flight Number 1708 out of San Diego, California	On-Board Delay of 1 hour 31 minutes	Flight was diverted and then arrived at DFW the same day.



**Table 4. Breakdown of JetBlue’s Long, On-Board Arrival and Departure Delays at JFK**

Number of On Board Delays Over 1 hour	43
Number of On-Board Delays Over 4 hours	26
Number of On-Board Delays Over 5 hours	21
Number of Passengers That Endured On-Board Delays Over 4 hours	2,962
Average Time Delay for Arrivals	265 minutes
Average Time Delay for Departures	298 minutes

Source: Office of Inspector General

**Table 5. Length and Outcome of JetBlue’s Long, On-Board Delays for Flights at or Traveling to John F. Kennedy Airport**

**Item 1. On-Board Delays for JFK Arrivals**

- Flight out of Fort Myers, Florida, was delayed over 9 hours. The flight was eventually deplaned.
- Flight out of Nashville, Tennessee, was delayed over 8 hours. The flight was eventually deplaned.
- Flight out of Houston, Texas, (Hobby Airport) was delayed over 7 hours. The flight was eventually deplaned.
- Flight out of Burbank, California, was delayed almost 6 hours. The flight was diverted and then arrived at JFK the same day.
- Flight out of Austin, Texas, was delayed almost 6 hours. The flight was eventually deplaned.
- Flight out of Orlando, Florida, was delayed for 5 and three-quarter hours. The flight was eventually deplaned.
- Flight out of Long Beach, California, was delayed for 5 hours. The flight was diverted and then arrived at JFK the same day.
- Flight out of Oakland, California was delayed for 4 and three-quarter hours. The flight was diverted and then arrived at JFK the same day.

**Item 2. On-Board Delays for JFK Departures**

- Flight to Aruba was delayed for 10 and half hours. The flight was eventually cancelled.
- Flight to Burbank, California, was delayed for 9 hours. The flight was eventually cancelled.

- Flight to Cancun, Mexico, was delayed for nearly 8 hours. The flight was eventually cancelled.
- Flight to Syracuse, New York, was delayed for 7 and a half hours. The flight was eventually cancelled.
- Flight to Houston, Texas, (Hobby Airport) was delayed for 7 and one-quarter hours. The flight eventually departed.
- Flight to Buffalo, New York, was delayed for 7 and one-quarter hours. The flight was eventually cancelled.
- Flight to Boston, Massachusetts, was delayed for 7 hours. The flight was eventually cancelled.
- Flight to Orlando, Florida, was delayed for nearly 7 hours. The flight was eventually cancelled.
- Flight to Phoenix, Arizona, was delayed for 6 and three-quarter hours. The flight was eventually cancelled.
- Flight to Burbank, California, was delayed for 6 and one-quarter hours. The flight eventually departed.
- Flight to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, was delayed for 6 and one-quarter hours. The flight eventually departed.
- Flight to Tampa, Florida, was delayed for 5 and half hours. The flight eventually departed.
- Flight to New Orleans, Louisiana, was delayed for 5 and a half hours. The flight was eventually cancelled.
- Flight to New Orleans, Louisiana, was delayed for 5 and a half hours. The flight was eventually cancelled.
- Flight to Burbank, California, was delayed for 5 and one-quarter hours. The flight eventually departed.
- Flight to Buffalo, New York, was delayed for 5 hours. The flight eventually departed.
- Flight to Seattle, Washington, was delayed for 4 and three-quarter hours. The flight eventually departed.
- Flight to Long Beach, California, was delayed for 4 and a half hours. The flight was eventually cancelled.
- Flight to Phoenix, Arizona, was delayed for 4 hours. The flight eventually departed.

Source: Office of Inspector General

**Table 6. Average On-Board Delays on February 14, 2007, at JFK for JetBlue, Delta, and American**

**Item 1. On-Board Delays for Arrivals**

- JetBlue had 14 arriving flights delayed longer than 1 hour, with an average on-board delay of 4 and half hours. The longest delay was 9 hours. There were 9 flights with delays longer than 3 hours.
- Delta had 15 arriving flights delayed longer than 1 hour, with an average on-board delay of 2 and half hours. The longest delay was 4 and one-quarter hours. There were 6 flights with delays longer than 3 hours.
- American had 15 arriving flights delayed longer than 1 hour, with an average on-board delay of 1 and half hours. The longest delay was 2 and three-quarter hours. There were 0 flights with delays longer than 3 hours.

**Item 2. On-Board Delays for Departures**

- JetBlue had 29 departing flights delayed longer than 1 hour, with an average on-board delay of 5 and three-quarter hours. The longest delay was 10 and one-quarter hours. There were 20 flights with delays longer than 3 hours.
- Delta had 39 departing flights delayed longer than 1 hour, with an average on-board delay of 3 and a half hours. The longest delay was 7 and one-quarter hours. There were 19 flights with delays longer than 3 hours.
- American had 8 departing flights delayed longer than 1 hour, with an average on-board delay of 1 and a half hours. The longest delay was 4 and one-quarter hours. There were 0 flights with delays longer than 3 hours.

Source: Office of Inspector General

**Exhibit B. Selected Airlines' Terms and Conditions for Handling Long, On-Board Delays**

<b>Airline</b>	<b>Definition of Extended Period of Time Stated in Customer Service Plans and/or Contracts of Carriage</b>	<b>Time to Deplane Stated in Customer Service Plans and/or Contracts of Carriage and/or Defined by Internal Policies</b>
Alaska	Definition of extended period of time stated in customer service plan and/or contract of carriage = 90 minutes	Time to deplane stated in customer service plan and/or contract of carriage and/or defined by internal policies = 2 hours for arrivals
Aloha	No definition of extended period of time stated in customer service plan and/or contract of carriage	No time to deplane stated in customer service plan and/or contract of carriage and/or defined by internal policies
American	Definition of extended period of time stated in customer service plan and/or contract of carriage = 2 hours	Time to deplane defined by internal policies = 4 hours (as of April 10, 2007)

ATA	Definition of extended period of time stated in customer service plan and/or contract of carriage =1 hour for beverages and 4 hours for catering	No time to deplane stated in customer service plan and/or contract of carriage and/or defined by internal policies
Continental	Definition of extended period of time stated in customer service plan and/or contract of carriage = 2 hours	Time to deplane stated in customer service plan and/or contract of carriage and/or defined by internal policies = 4 hours for departures (as of June15, 2007)
Delta	No definition of extended period of time stated in customer service plan and/or contract of carriage	No time to deplane stated in customer service plan and/or contract of carriage and/or defined by internal policies
Hawaiian	Definition of extended period of time stated in customer service plan and/or contract of carriage = 2 hours	Time to deplane stated in customer service plan and/or contract of carriage and/or defined by internal policies = 2 hours (as of August 1, 2001)
JetBlue	No definition of extended period of time stated in customer service plan and/or contract of carriage	Time to deplane stated in customer service plan and/or contract of carriage and/or defined by internal policies = 5 hours (as of February 20, 2007)
Midwest	No definition of extended period of time stated in customer service plan and/or contract of carriage	No time to deplane stated in customer service plan and/or contract of carriage and/or defined by internal policies
Northwest	Definition of extended period of time stated in customer service plan and/or contract of carriage =1 hour for arrivals and 3 hours for departures	Time to deplane stated in customer service plan and/or contract of carriage and/or defined by internal policies = 1 hour for arrivals and 3 hours for departures
Southwest	Definition of extended period of time stated in customer service plan and/or contract of carriage = 2 hours	Time to deplane stated in customer service plan and/or contract of carriage and/or defined by internal policies = 2 hours
United	No definition of extended period of time stated in customer service plan and/or contract of carriage	Time to deplane stated in customer service plan and/or contract of carriage and/or defined by internal policies = 1 and a half hours for arrivals and 4 hours for departures (as of September 5, 2007)
US Airways	Definition of extended period of time stated in customer service plan and/or contract of carriage = 2 hours	No time to deplane stated in customer service plan and/or contract of carriage and/or defined by internal policies

**Exhibit C. Selected Airports' Policies for Assisting in Long, On-Board Delays**

<b>Airport</b>	<b>Plan to Deplane Passengers</b>	<b>Airport Policy</b>
Seattle-Tacoma International	Plan to deplane passengers? Yes	Airport policy is to determine remote parking locations for aircraft to deplane passengers and provide buses if requested.
Dallas/Fort Worth International	Plan to deplane passengers? Yes	Airport policy is to monitor length of time hold positions of aircraft. If over 2 hours, coordinate aircraft return to gate.
Austin/Bergstrom International	Plan to deplane passengers? No	Airport policy is to determine parking spots of diverted aircraft.
Indianapolis International	Plan to deplane passengers? Yes	Airport policy is to provide available gate or remotely deplane passengers to buses upon request.
George Bush Intercontinental	Plan to deplane passengers? Yes	Airport policy is to provide buses when requested.
Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International	Plan to deplane passengers? Yes	Airport policy is to provide mobile lounges to take passengers to gate when requested by airlines.
Honolulu International	Plan to deplane passengers? No	Airport policy is to encourage carriers to off-load passengers and offer immediate assistance by, among other things, offering use of available airport facilities.
John F. Kennedy International (New York)	Plan to deplane passengers? Yes	Airport policy is to, after 2 hours and upon request, help to find alternate airport locations to safely deplane passengers.
General Mitchell International (Milwaukee)	Plan to deplane passengers? Yes	Airport policy is to provide buses when requested.
Minneapolis-St. Paul International	Plan to deplane passengers? Yes	Airport policy is to provide air stairs and buses to deplane passengers when requested.
Dallas Love Field	Plan to deplane passengers? Yes	Airport policy is to provide emergency services upon request.
Chicago O'Hare International	Plan to deplane passengers? No	Airport policy is to monitor length of time hold positions of aircraft.
Phoenix Sky Harbor International	Plan to deplane passengers? Yes	Airport policy is to help with deplanements via jet bridge or remote hardstand and provide buses to transport passengers.

Note: The policies listed in the table are not all inclusive; these are highlights from the airports' contingency plans for dealing with long, on-board delays.

## **Exhibit D. Stakeholders Visited or Contacted**

### **Airlines Visited:**

- American Airlines—at its headquarters in Fort Worth, Texas, at DFW International Airport, Texas, at Austin-Bergstrom International, Texas, and at JFK International Airport, New York.
- JetBlue Airways—at its headquarters in Forest Hills, New York, and at JFK International Airport, New York.
- Southwest Airlines—at Dallas-Love Field, Texas, and at Austin-Bergstrom International, Texas.
- United Airlines—at DFW International Airport, Texas, and at JFK International Airport, New York.
- Continental Airlines—at Austin-Bergstrom International, Texas.
- Delta Airlines—at JFK International Airport, New York.

### **Airlines Contacted:**

- Alaska Airlines
- Aloha Airlines
- American Airlines
- ATA Airlines
- Continental Airlines
- Delta Air Lines
- Hawaiian Airlines
- JetBlue Airways
- Midwest Airlines
- Northwest Airlines
- Southwest Airlines
- United Airlines
- US Airways

### **Airports Visited:**

- Dallas/Fort Worth International
- City of Austin Aviation Department at Austin-Bergstrom International, Austin, Texas

- Port Authority of New York and New Jersey at John F. Kennedy International, Jamaica, New York

**Airports Contacted:**

- Chicago O'Hare International
- Dallas Love Field
- General Mitchell International (Milwaukee)
- George Bush Intercontinental (Houston)
- Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International
- Honolulu International
- Indianapolis International
- Minneapolis-St. Paul International
- Phoenix Sky Harbor International
- Seattle-Tacoma International

**Federal Aviation Administration Air Traffic Control Facilities Visited or Contacted:**

- DFW Air Traffic Control Tower, DFW Airport, Texas
- Air Route Traffic Control Center, Fort Worth, Texas
- Austin Air Traffic Control Tower, Austin, Texas
- Air Traffic Systems Operations, Tactical Operations Northeast United States, Jamaica, New York
- JFK Air Traffic Control Tower, Jamaica, New York

**Trade Associations Contacted**

- Air Transport Association, Washington, D.C.
- Airports Council International-North America, Washington, D.C.
- Airline Pilots Association, Washington, D.C.
- Association of Flight Attendants, Washington, D.C.