

Summary of OIG Report #CC-2007-105:

Actions Needed To Improve Airline Customer Service and Minimize Long, On-Board Delays

Released September 27, 2007

Goal of Report:

Review airline customer service issues and the actions needed from the DOT, FAA, airlines, and airports to minimize long, on-board delays. A summary of the problem (based on the past 7 months of 2007) includes:

- Nearly 28 percent of flights were delayed, cancelled, or diverted—with airlines' on-time performance at the lowest percentage (72 percent) recorded in the last 10 years.
- Not only are there more delays, but also longer delay periods. Of those flights arriving late, passengers experienced a record-breaking average flight arrival delay of 57 minutes, up nearly 3 minutes from 2006.
- More than 54,000 flights affecting nearly 3.7 million passengers experienced taxi-in and taxi-out times of 1 to 5 hours or more. This is an increase of nearly 42 percent as compared to the same period in 2006.

Airline Customer Service – Why it is a priority

- *Airlines Agreed To Execute a Voluntary Airline Customer Service Commitment:* Since 1999, airlines have been doing well in most areas, but not in aircraft delays.
- *Rising Flight Delays Are Leading to More Long, On-Board Delays*
- *Rising Flight Delays Are Also Leading to More Air Traveler Complaints:* DOT ranked flight problems as the #1 air traveler complaint, with baggage complaints and customer care ranked as #2 and #3, respectively.
- *Passengers' Flight Experiences Are Further Complicated by Capacity and Demand Matters:* Air travelers' dissatisfaction with flight problems, is further compounded by reduced capacity and increased demand, which leads to fuller flights.

Top Four Actions to improve airline customer service /minimize long, on-board delays:

1. **The airlines should specify in detail their policies and plans to minimize long, on-board delays and off-load passengers within certain periods of time and adhere to such policies.**
 - a. 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.
 - b. 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.

Finding: *Lack of a System-Wide Policy Contributed to American's (12/29/06) and JetBlue's (2/14/07) Long, On-Board Delays.* As a result, American instituted a new policy designed to prevent on-board delays from exceeding 4 hours and implemented an airborne diversion distribution plan 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." JetBlue also set a time limit for any long, on-board delay away from a gate—a 5-hour maximum—and established procedures to monitor delayed flights. Also, just a week after the February 14 incident, JetBlue published its own customer bill of rights.

Finding: *Contingency Planning for Extreme Weather Is Not a New Concern for Airlines.* However Airlines still need to clearly and consistently define terms in the Commitment provision such as "an extended period of time" for meeting customers' essential needs during long, on-board delays. This particular definition should be a top priority for airlines when implementing their contingency plans.

Finding: *Airline Contingency Plans Are Still Not Adequate To Handle Long, On-Board Delays.* 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. All airlines should 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.

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Finding: *Airlines Must Resume Efforts To Self-Audit Their Customer Service Plans.* This was a recommendation in 2001, but not all airlines are conducting audits. The key to the success of the airlines' new policies designed to prevent long, on-board delays is for each airline to (1) have a credible tracking system for 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.

2. **Airport operators should become more involved in contingency planning for extraordinary flight disruptions.** All 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 for 2 hours on the tarmac. 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.

Finding: Based on discussions with airport, airline, and FAA personnel, it appears that in the recent incidents that stranded passengers for extraordinarily long periods, there was no coordinated effort by the airlines, airport operators, and FAA to deal with such events.

3. **There are best practices and ongoing initiatives that, if properly executed, should help to mitigate long, on-board delays in the immediate term.** *Top practices include:*
 - a. Setting the maximum amount of time that passengers will remain on-board aircraft before deplaning.
 - b. "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.
 - c. Keeping gate space available for off-loading passengers in times of irregular operations.
 - d. Implementing programs that provide volunteers from throughout the airline's system that are flown or driven to the destination needing assistance (re-booking or directing passengers to connecting flights)
 - e. Implementing flexible staffing arrangements and periodic duty rotations to meet the challenges during irregular operations.
 - f. Holding teleconferences before a known weather event with possibly 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 and availability, staffing, and possible scheduled operation (aircraft and passenger) reductions. Similar meetings are already held between FAA and airlines.
 - g. Using the Aircraft Communication Addressing and Reporting System (equipped on most commercial aircraft) to send a message to the airlines' Operations Control Center notifying it that the aircraft has been away from gate for more than 3 hours without departing.
 - h. 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 will 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.

Other Recommendation: A more comprehensive plan of action is needed and should involve collaboration among airlines, airports, FAA, and DOT. Suggest 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. (One was formed pre 9/11, but never materialized as focus shifted).

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Examples of progress in the reducing delays:

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: JFK, LaGuardia, and Newark. Group addresses 2 main areas: technical issues and customer service (i.e. best ways to deplane passengers and alleviate time on plane).

Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport - 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 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.

FAA’s Airspace Flow Program – Gives FAA and the airlines the capability to maximize the overall use of the National Airspace System while minimizing delays and congestion. The Program doesn’t add capacity but limits negative effects of bad weather by giving airlines the option of either accepting delays for flights scheduled to fly through storms or flying longer routes to safely maneuver around them.

ATA’s Initiative To Address Long, On-Board Delays – This report mentioned that their plan merely shifts responsibility away from the airline to the DOT/FAA.

4. **DOT, FAA, airlines, and airports should complete actions immediately on outstanding recommendations—some dating back to 2001—to improve airline customer service and minimize long, on-board delays.** *These include:*

- a. DOT conduct incident investigations involving long, on-board delays; identify trends and patterns of such events; and implement workable solutions for mitigating extraordinary flight disruptions
- b. DOT oversee the airlines’ policies for dealing with long, on-board delays; 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
- c. Implement the necessary changes in the airlines’ on-time performance reporting to capture all long, on-board delays
- d. Airlines define what constitutes an “extended period of time” for meeting passengers’ essential needs and set time limits for delay durations
- e. Airlines establish specific targets for reducing chronically delayed or cancelled flights
- f. Airlines disclose on-time flight performance via internet or on phone reservation system without being prompted
- g. Airlines resume efforts to self-audit their customer service plans
- h. Large- and medium-hub airport operators establish and implement processes for monitoring lengthy delays
- i. Reconvene the task force

Other recommendation: It is imperative that the FAA keeps its short-term capacity measures on track. This is particularly important given that the development and implementation of the Next Generation Air Transportation System is a long-term undertaking. Key short-term initiatives include new airfield projects at six airports (including projects at Washington Dulles and Chicago O’Hare), new routes and procedures that can reduce flight times, and airspace redesign efforts. History shows that airspace changes are vital for realizing benefits from new runway projects and can enhance the flow of air travel even without new airport infrastructure

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Concluding Comments: The busy holiday travel season will soon be upon us, and the extent to which delays; including long, on-board delays and cancellations; will affect passengers in the remainder of 2007 and beyond will depend upon how DOT, FAA, airlines, and airports coordinate their efforts to avoid a repeat of the events of this past winter and current 2007 events.