

**ORAL TESTIMONY OF  
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PRESIDENT AND CEO  
AIR TRANSPORT ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA, INC.  
BEFORE THE  
SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE AND TRANSPORTATION CONCERNING  
AIRLINE SERVICE IMPROVEMENTS**

**APRIL 11, 2007**

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Vice Chairman and members of the committee, I am pleased to be here today on behalf of the nearly four hundred thousand passenger-airline employees who, every day, make it their mission to transport over two million passengers throughout the United States and the world, as quickly and as smoothly as possible.

Much has been said today about the quality of airline customer service – some of it harsh, some of it fair and deserved. While we don't always get it right, with more than 20,000 flights per day we get it right most of the time. What troubles me is the suggestion that our members and their employees don't care about how passengers are treated. That simply is not true. They care deeply about their customers and the service they receive. Any suggestion to the contrary is wrong. Following safety, on-time service is the most important factor for success in the airline business. The reputations that the airlines earn for good service is the currency they have to offer in the marketplace for passengers.

This afternoon I will emphasize two key points:

- You can't effectively legislate airline operational response to irregular operations, including severe weather conditions; and
- Arbitrary deadlines and inflexible standards have serious unintended consequences.

**Legislation is Not Needed**

Delays and cancellations are the enemies of every airline. They are costly. They interfere with customers' plans, drive missed connections and mishandled bags, upset carefully constructed flight schedules, and create a cascading effect that can spread to many cities and disrupt passengers' plans for several days. DOT estimated that delays cost U.S. airline passengers \$9.4 billion in 2005, and the airlines nearly \$6 billion. Thus, passengers and airlines have the identical goal of completing scheduled flights safely and on time.

These factors alone are incentive enough for our airline members to work hard to avoid delays and cancellations. But there is another powerful incentive at work, and that is the marketplace. Recent events have caused all carriers to review their policies and procedures, update contingency plans, and engage their key airports in discussions about dealing with severe weather situations.

In addition, as you heard earlier, the DOT Inspector General is reviewing these incidents and will soon issue a report that will clarify exactly what happened, and make appropriate recommendations. We called for DOT to review these incidents and we look forward to the Inspector General's report.

Finally, extended delays are rare, and the extraordinary weather that triggered these events cannot be overlooked. The decisions American and JetBlue made as their situations unfolded involved extensive and ongoing internal coordination, consultation with ATC/FAA officials, and were made with the goal of getting passengers to their destinations safely. As it turned out, on December 29, 2006, American experienced more diversions than on any other day in its history with the exception of 9/11. Moreover, delay statistics maintained by DOT show that just 36 out of more than seven million flights in 2006 – just five ten-thousandths of a percent – had delays of more than five hours, and only 1,259 flights were delayed between three and five hours.

In short, Congress cannot legislate good weather or the best way to respond to bad weather because every situation is unique.

### **The Legislation Will Have Unintended Consequences**

A strict three-hour limit, even with a 30-minute extension, would eliminate carrier flexibility to deal with these unique situations and inconvenience more, not fewer, passengers. No passenger likes a delayed flight. What they like even less is not being able to get to their destinations at all.

The proposed legislation will force airlines to inconvenience planeloads of people to satisfy the demand of just one passenger to deplane. We do not think this is good customer service. By forcing carriers to deplane passengers, which in most cases would require the plane to return to the terminal, the legislation would lead to:

- An overall increase in cancellations
- Unplanned overnight stays for unaccompanied minors
- More bags that miss connections
- Missed meetings and vacations; and
- Cascading cancellations and delays caused by planes and crews out of position

Moreover, fully loaded airplanes make re-booking passengers on later flights increasingly difficult.

### **Conclusion**

Flexibility is the best tool an airline has in responding to these situations. More passengers will be inconvenienced by a strict rule requiring airlines to deplane them instead of letting the airlines deal with these extremely rare situations using their knowledge and experience.

What is in the best interests of the passengers also is in the best interests of the airlines – limiting cancellations and completing flights safely. Airlines and their customers need crews and planes to get to their destinations to keep the system running. With 42,000 city pairs and more than 20,000 flights per day, carriers need flexibility to respond to irregular operations and get passengers to their destinations.