

**Before the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
Subcommittee on Aviation
United States House of Representatives**

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

**Statement of
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Inspector General
U.S. Department of Transportation**



Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

We are pleased to be here today to discuss airline customer service issues and the actions needed from the Department of Transportation (DOT), Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), airlines, and airports to minimize long, on-board delays. This hearing is both timely and important given the record-breaking flight delays, cancellations, diversions, and on-board tarmac delays that air travelers have already experienced this year. Based on the first 7 months of the year:

- 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.

As you know, Secretary Peters has expressed serious concerns about the airlines' treatment of passengers during extended ground delays. Earlier this year, she requested that we examine the specific incidents involving American Airlines (American) and JetBlue Airways (JetBlue), during which passengers were stranded on board aircraft for extended periods of time, and the Air Transport Association's¹ member-airlines'² contingency plans for dealing with long, on-board delays. She also requested that we highlight industry best practices that can help to mitigate these situations and provide recommendations on what actions should be taken to prevent a recurrence of such events. We issued our report yesterday,³ which included a series of recommendations the Department can take to improve airline customer service.

Today, I would like to discuss four key points on actions that would help to improve airline customer service and minimize long, on-board delays. These points are based on the results of our recent review as well as our previous airline customer service reviews.

¹ 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.

² 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.

³ OIG Report Number AV-2007-077 "Actions Needed To Minimize Long, On-Board Delays," September 25, 2007. OIG reports and testimonies are available on our website: www.oig.dot.gov.

- **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.** The American and JetBlue events of December 29, 2006, and February 14, 2007, respectively, underscored the importance of improving customer service for passengers who are stranded on board aircraft for extended periods of time. On those dates, thousands of passengers experienced long, on-board delays, in some cases for over 9 hours, with little more than a snack and beverage for the entire time. However, the events were neither isolated incidents nor limited to American and JetBlue; these delays occurred throughout the system and at many airlines.

Although severe weather was the primary cause of the delays, it was not the only factor—neither airline had a system-wide policy and procedure in place to mitigate long, on-board delays and off-load passengers within a certain period of time. In fact, prior to the American and JetBlue incidents, only a few airlines reviewed had an established time limit on the duration of tarmac delays, as we reported in our 2001 review.⁴ Since these incidents, eight airlines have now set a time limit on delay durations before deplaning passengers but five still have not.

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.

- **Airports' operators should become more involved in contingency planning for extraordinary flight disruptions.** Our examination of 13 airports'⁵ contingency plans found that only 2 airports have a process for monitoring and mitigating long, on-board delays. This 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 all 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.

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

⁴ OIG Report Number AV-2001-020, "Final Report on Airline Customer Service Commitment," February 12, 2001.

⁵ Austin-Bergstrom International, Chicago O'Hare International, Dallas/Fort Worth International, Dallas Love Field, General Mitchell International, George H. 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.

agencies heavily supported by public funding and should ensure that passengers' essential needs are met and prevent long, on-board delays to the extent possible. 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.

Therefore, large- and medium-hub⁶ 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.

- **There are best practices and ongoing initiatives that, if properly executed, should help to mitigate long, on-board delays in the immediate term.** 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 that airlines and airports are taking to mitigate the effects of these occurrences. These include:

- setting the maximum amount of time that passengers will remain on-board aircraft before deplaning.
- “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.
- keeping gate space available for off-loading passengers in times of irregular operations.

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

⁶ 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.

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.

Also, after our review began, some airports moved forward with other initiatives meant to assist the airlines in dealing with long, on-board delays. For example, 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: John F. Kennedy (JFK), LaGuardia, and Newark Liberty International Airports. 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. In the customer service area, the focus is on identifying best methods for getting passengers off aircraft and enhancements for reducing the amount of time passengers are kept on aircraft.

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 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.

- **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.** Given the events of this past winter, DOT should take a more active role in overseeing customer service issues involving long, on-board delays, 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 2001 on airline customer service, which were directed at delay and cancellation problems. To improve the accountability, enforcement, and protection afforded to air travelers we recommend, among other things, that:

- DOT conduct incident investigations involving long, on-board delays;
- DOT oversee the airlines' policies for dealing with long, on-board delays;
- airlines define what constitutes an "extended period of time" for meeting passengers' essential needs and set time limits for delay durations;
- airlines establish specific targets for reducing chronically delayed or cancelled flights;

- airlines disclose on-time flight performance;
- airlines resume efforts to self-audit their customer service plans; and
- large- and medium-hub airport operators establish and implement processes for monitoring lengthy delays.

Mr. Chairman, in addition to the steps I have just outlined, it is imperative that 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 runway 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.

Before I discuss these key points in detail, I would like to briefly describe why airline customer service is again a central issue and highlight a few statistics showing how air travelers are affected by delays and cancellations.

Airlines Agreed To Execute a Voluntary Airline Customer Service Commitment

As this subcommittee is aware, 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 congressional hearings on these issues, ATA member airlines agreed to execute a voluntary Airline Customer Service Commitment⁷ to demonstrate their dedication to improving air travel (see figure 1). The Commitment

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

⁷ 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).

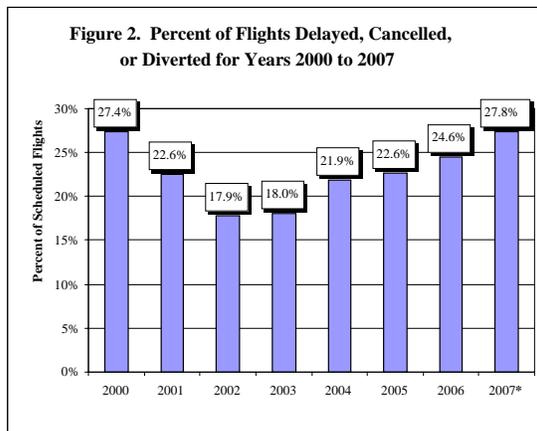
provisions include meeting passengers' essential needs during long, on-board delays.

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 in February 2001. Overall, we found that the ATA airlines were making progress toward meeting the Commitment, which has benefited air travelers in a number of important areas, such as offering the lowest fare available, holding reservations, and responding in a timely manner to complaints. However, these areas are not directly related to flight delays or cancellations—which the Commitment did not directly address—and these areas are still the underlying causes of deep-seated customer dissatisfaction.

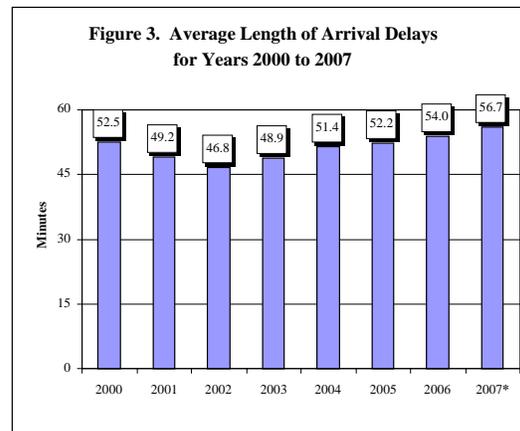
Rising Flight Delays Are Leading to More Long, On-Board Delays

A review of vital statistics shows the impact that flight delays and cancellations had on air travelers during 2006 and the first 7 months of 2007, compared to peak-year 2000. The 2006 travel period was not only the busiest⁸ since 2000, it also reached near-record 2000 levels for flight delays and cancellations. Domestic-wide for 2006, nearly 25 percent of flights were delayed, cancelled, or diverted, the highest percentage since the year 2000, when it hit 27 percent. Based on the first 7 months of 2007, *airlines' on-time performance was at the lowest percentage (72 percent) recorded in the last 10 years*; nearly 28 percent of flights were delayed, cancelled, or diverted compared to nearly 24 percent during the same period in 2006.

Figure 2 illustrates the changes in percent of flights delayed, cancelled, or diverted from 2000 to 2007.



*January through July
Source: BTS data



*January through July
Source: BTS data

⁸ As measured by scheduled departures.

Not only are there more delays, but also longer delay durations. Domestic-wide for 2006, for those domestic flights delayed, passengers experienced an average flight arrival delay of 54 minutes. Figure 3 illustrates the average flight arrival times from 2000 to 2007. Based on the first 7 months of data, it is clear 2007 could be even worse. For flights that arrived late, passengers experienced an average flight delay of nearly 57 minutes, up nearly 3 minutes from FY 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. This is an increase of nearly 42 percent (from 38,076 to 54,029) as compared to the same period in 2006 (see table).

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

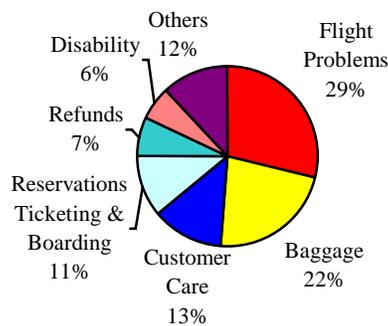
Time Period	2006	2007	% Change
1-2 Hrs.	33,438	47,558	42.23
2-3 Hrs.	3,781	5,213	37.87
3-4 Hrs.	710	1,025	44.37
4-5 Hrs.	120	189	57.50
5 or > Hrs.	27	44	62.96
Total:	38,076	54,029	41.90

Source: OIG analysis based on BTS data

Rising Flight Delays Are Also Leading to More Air Traveler Complaints

Against this backdrop of increasing delays and cancellations, consumer complaints are also rising. DOT’s Air Travel Consumer Reports disclosed that, for the first 7 months of 2007, complaints involving 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 involving U.S. airlines in 2007 have already exceeded 2006 complaint totals, including complaints about flight problems.

Figure 4. Air Travel Consumer Complaints, 2006



Source: DOT’s Air Travel Consumer Reports for 2006

Over the last several years, DOT ranked flight problems as the number one air traveler complaint, with baggage complaints and customer care⁹ 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 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 traffic demand, and existing capacity management at already congested airports.

I would now like to turn to my key points on actions needed to improve airline customer service and minimize long, on-board delays.

⁹ Complaints such as poor employee attitude, refusal to provide assistance, unsatisfactory seating, and unsatisfactory food service are categorized as customer care complaints.

The Airlines Must 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

The airlines continue to face challenges in mitigating extraordinary flight disruptions such as long, on-board delays during extreme weather. Based on Bureau of Transportation Statistics (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.

The severity of the on-board delays last winter drew national attention, and the events that received the most attention—the American and JetBlue incidents—underscored the importance of improving customer service for passengers who are stranded on board aircraft for extended periods of time.

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 at that airport—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.

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 delayed more than 1 hour versus 43 for JetBlue.

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 extended 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.

After the December 29 event, 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.”

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. JetBlue plans to offer compensation in the form of vouchers for flight disruptions, such as cancellations.

Contingency Planning for Extreme Weather Is Not a New Concern for Airlines

Contingency planning for extreme weather is not a new concern for airlines, as evidenced by the June 1999 Commitment provision, which states that:

- The airlines will 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.
- Each carrier will 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. 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 the record-breaking on-board delays we have already seen in 2007—particularly those exceeding 4 hours.

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

While a task force was formed, the effort never materialized as priorities shifted after September 11, 2001. Our testimony before this subcommittee in April 2007¹⁰ recommended that the task force be reconvened, and, to date, there has been no action to do so.

Airline Contingency Plans Are Still Not Adequate To Handle Long, On-Board Delays

Our recent review examined the actions taken by each airline to clarify terms relating to customers’ essential needs during long, on-board delays and found the following:

- Five of the 13 airlines still had not clearly and consistently defined terms in the Commitment provision, such as “an extended period of time” for meeting customers’ essential needs during long, on-board delays.
- Of the eight 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.

Also, 8 of the 13 airlines have now set a time limit on delay durations before deplaning passengers but 5 still have not.

Given the extended ground delays that stranded passengers on board aircraft this past winter, all airlines should specify in detail the efforts that will be made to get

¹⁰ OIG Testimony Number CC-2007-046, “Actions Needed To Improve Airline Customer Service,” April 20, 2007.

passengers off the aircraft when delayed for extended periods, either before departure or after arrival.

Airlines Must Resume Efforts To Self-Audit Their Customer Service Plans

In our 2001 report, we recommended, and the ATA airlines agreed, 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.

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,¹¹ 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 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.

Airport Operators Must Become More Involved in Contingency Planning for Extraordinary Flight Disruptions

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). We received plans or responses from the 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 on the tarmac for 2 hours.

¹¹ 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.

- 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 for deplaning passengers or, when a gate is not available; deplaning passengers using mobile air stairs; loading passengers onto buses; and returning to the terminal.

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 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 public funding and should ensure that passengers' essential needs are met and prevent long, on-board delays to the extent possible. 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.

In our view, large- and medium-hub airport operators should 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. 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.

There Are Best Practices and Ongoing Initiatives That, if Properly Executed, Should Help in Mitigating Long, On-Board Delays in the Immediate Term

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 on February 22, 2007, 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.

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.

Airlines' and Airports' Best Practices and Ongoing Initiatives

Best Practices: The best practices we identified during our review are not all inclusive, and the airlines or airports should consider incorporating them into their ongoing 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, which should involve collaboration and coordination among the airlines, airports, FAA, and DOT. These practices include the following:

- Setting the maximum amount of time that passengers will remain on-board aircraft before deplaning them. For example, an airline at one airport it services has a 1-hour policy that was executed effectively during the December 29, 2006, incidents.
- “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 passenger congestion at the airlines' check-in counters and gate areas. 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, preferably that same day. However, 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 arrival aircraft and used solely for deplaning passengers.
- Implementing programs that provide volunteers 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 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.
- 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.
- 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.

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 the airports could be changed to reduce flight delays. In the customer service area, the focus is on identifying 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.

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

In preparing for this summer's peak season, FAA expanded an air traffic program that reduces flight delays. The Airspace Flow Program, as it is known, 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.

Before last year, 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. This 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.

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 it, the airlines, and airports 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 dissatisfaction with airlines. These recommendations are listed below.

- **Conduct incident investigations involving long, on-board delays.** Based on the results of our 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.
- **Implement the necessary changes in the airlines' on-time performance reporting to capture all long, on-board delays.** Delay statistics (see statistics in the table on page 7) do not accurately portray the magnitude of long, on-board delays because (1) if a flight taxis out, sits for hours, and then taxis back in and is cancelled, the delay is not recorded; and (2) 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.

Carriers are not required to report gate departure times when a flight is later cancelled. So, there is no record of how long a flight remains at the gate or sits on the tarmac before it is cancelled. This is true for flights with lengthy delays at the originating airport that are later cancelled. This was the case with some JetBlue flights at JFK on February 14, 2007, and at airports where flights were diverted and then cancelled, such as some of the American flights 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.

- **Clarify terms in airlines' contingency plans.** 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 delay durations before deplaning passengers; and (3) incorporate such policies in their contracts of carriage and post them on their Internet sites.
- **Establish specific targets for reducing chronically delayed or cancelled flights.**¹² In 2001, we recommended that the airlines establish in the Commitment and in their Customer Service Plans targets for reducing the number of flights that

¹² 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.

have been 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 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 establishing targets for reducing the number of flights that have been chronically delayed.

- **Disclose on-time flight performance.** We recommended in our 2001 report that the airlines disclose to customers at the time of booking and 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, we found in 2006 that 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 recommend that the airlines 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 customer service plans.** Also, in our 2001 report, we recommended, and the ATA airlines agreed, 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.

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 as priorities shifted after September 11, 2001. Now is the time for airlines to reconvene the 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 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 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 airport operators should work with airlines to establish policies for deplaning passengers and ensure that these policies are adhered to.

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.

That concludes my statement. I would be glad to answer any questions that you or other Members of the subcommittee might have.

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.

**Testimony Before the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure,
Subcommittee on Aviation, United States House of Representatives**

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

Year	Percentage
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

Year	Minutes
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. 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

Complaint	Percentage
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