

**OPENING STATEMENT OF
HONORABLE JAMES L. OBERSTAR
BEFORE THE HOUSE AVIATION SUBCOMMITTEE
AVIATION CONSUMER ISSUES
APRIL 20, 2007**

- I want to thank Chairman Costello and Ranking Member Petri for calling today's hearing on *Aviation Consumer Issues* to receive testimony from the Department of Transportation Inspector General (DOT IG), Department of Transportation (DOT), airlines, and consumer representatives.
- In 1999, this Committee considered implementing a passengers' bill of rights. The Committee heard testimony from passengers, the airlines and consumer groups and decided that the airlines made a compelling case for self-regulation.
- In June of 2001, the DOT IG reported progress towards internal implementation of the ATA's "Airline Customer Service Commitment," an important step toward fulfilling the promise the airlines made to this Committee and the traveling public. In the wake of September 11th and the airlines' financial hardships, consumer service issues were temporarily deferred.
- As passenger travel increases, so do delays and passenger complaints. I would like this hearing to be an impetus for airlines to re-commit themselves to their earlier "Airline Customer Service Commitment" and to the internal self-monitoring of those commitments.
- In 1999, the airlines made a commitment to implement internal quality assurance and performance measurement systems. However, the DOT IG will testify today that not all air carriers have implemented such systems. We need to keep the pressure on the air carriers to develop internal controls so that they know when they are falling short on their commitments and can take corrective action. While I do not believe that we should legislate specific customer service provisions, I do believe that airlines should be held accountable for their air carrier customer service policies.
- One way to ensure accountability is to make certain that the DOT has the authority and resources necessary to investigate passenger complaints and levy fines against the airlines when necessary. I look forward to hearing from the DOT IG on ways that the DOT can improve its enforcement processes for consumer complaints.

- Improving communication to the consumer is also a critical step. All too often passengers are either not informed or inadequately informed about delays, or the reasons for delays, cancellations, and diversions.
- I have also heard much about passenger frustration at getting through to an airline 800 number to obtain information or reschedule their delayed or cancelled flight, or if they are fortunate enough to talk to a live person, oftentimes that person has no information to give.
- Today, we will hear testimony about these frustrations and how different airlines handled the situations. Airlines have a choice in this matter. Good customer relations would dictate full and adequate disclosure of pending delays and cancellations, as well as of the steps which will be taken to accommodate passengers when excessive delays occur. Development of plans and procedures for accommodating passengers in such situations, including disseminating critical information, should be a top priority for each airline.
- The airlines must also provide consumers with the ability to access information easily. Passengers need to have a clear forum for their complaints, and the airlines should publicize these complaint statistics and delays so consumers can make informed decisions about the carrier and flights they travel on. Congress should not have to force airlines' compliance with simple customer relation initiatives – but we will if we have to.
- The airlines use our nation's public air space and facilities, we entrust our lives to them and use their services. In return, there should be a level of accountability to comply with their customer service commitments.
- Thank you again Chairman Costello for your leadership on this issue. I want to thank the witnesses for coming forward to share their testimony with us today.