

2006 and 2007 and found no appreciable change in the national weather between these periods.

While 23 percent of arrival delays across the country were attributable to weather during summer 2007, we found that weather had either no or minor impact on operations for 52 of 90 days. Even on days when weather was reported as having no or minor impact, airlines still could only achieve an average on-time performance of 74 percent.¹⁰

On days with higher levels (over 10 percent) of severely or moderately affected operations, arrival delays were only 30 percent greater than on days where weather had no or minor impact. However, on days with severe and moderate weather impact, average daily cancellations were twice as high as on days where weather had no or minor impact. Some airports did see selected periods of worsened weather last summer.

At the majority of the 15 airports we reviewed, the severity of weather impacting flight operations did not decline appreciably between the summers of 2006 and 2007. Nonetheless, airlines at those airports reported that weather was the leading, direct cause of delays (32 percent). The apparent conflict is answered by considering that as schedules increasingly exceed capacity, even in good weather, the slightest degradation in weather conditions can disproportionately affect on-time performance.

While extreme weather conditions can significantly delay or prevent the operation of a flight, extreme weather only accounted for 4 percent of delays in summer 2007 at the 15 airports examined. However, we did find that extreme weather was a significant cause of delays (1,300) and cancellations (1,100) at DFW in June 2007.

Nation-Wide Airspace Congestion: While many airports and their surrounding airspace have adequate capacity, other locations reached their saturation points, including air corridors connecting New York, Chicago, and Atlanta, accounting for more than 50 percent of flight delays system-wide. The biggest airspace bottlenecks this past summer were at the three major New York area airports and the surrounding airspace, accounting for more than one-third of the flight delays system-wide.

Airline Scheduling and Airport Capacity: In 2007, airlines scheduled flights above airport capacity to handle demand, and this contributed significantly to delays at specific airports. Our analysis of the 15 airports examined showed that during summer 2007, 6 had flights scheduled either at or over capacity at optimum weather conditions. Combined, airlines scheduled flights above the average optimum capacity at key airports such as JFK, LaGuardia, Newark Liberty, Philadelphia, Chicago O'Hare, and Ronald Reagan Washington-National.

¹⁰ Consists of days where FAA reports of the combined "none" or "minor" weather impacts on flight operations equaled or exceeded 90 percent of each day's operations for the group of 55 airports tracked by FAA.

In summer 2007 at Chicago O'Hare, there was evidence of some peaking beyond optimum weather conditions in the morning hours, and again, later in the afternoon. The problems with over-scheduling are exacerbated when scheduled flights exceed optimum airport capacity in poor weather conditions (i.e., when Instrument Flight Rules take effect) throughout most of the day.

For example, in one 15-minute period at Chicago O'Hare International Airport, we found that over 45 flights were scheduled to depart—nearly double the average departure capacity of the airport at that time. There were 2 other 15-minute time periods when 35 or more flights were scheduled to depart in one 15-minute period.

When airports are over-scheduled during peak hours, even small increases in flight operations can have a disproportionately larger impact on flight delays, as was the case in the New York region. For example, as flight operations expanded at JFK over the last several years, delays increased at that airport and at LaGuardia and Newark.

Scheduled flights at JFK increased by 21,000 between the summers of 2006 and 2007, and delays and cancellations at all three New York airports increased by 40,000 for the same period. When weather or other disruptions at these airports do occur, they can disproportionately impact on-time performance and cause longer recovery time for airports.

Spacing of Aircraft on Final Approach: While problems are traceable to increased operations, “excessive spacing” on final approach was also a factor in the New York area. In its December 2007 report, the New York Aviation Rulemaking Committee (ARC) reported that spacing between aircraft on final approach has been steadily increasing beyond limits needed for safety, which contributed significantly to arrival delays at the JFK, LaGuardia, and Newark airports.

Because of additional spacing, well-established, predictable airport acceptance rates became unreliable. This resulted in increased probability of go-arounds, no-notice holdings, increased vectoring, and sector overload. FAA recognizes the importance of the problem but has not quantified the impact on last summer's delays.

Outlook for Summer 2008: Near-Term Solutions Are Urgently Needed To Mitigate Congestion

Whether or not delays this summer will reach the extreme levels of last year depends on several factors. These include weather conditions, impacts of a softening economy and higher fuel prices on the industry, major airlines' efforts to reduce capacity (by taking aircraft out of service), and the effectiveness of initiatives planned or underway at already congested airports. We note that three airlines have ceased operations in the last 2 weeks.

Our analysis shows that there are several airports to watch closely this summer because of severe peaking during part of the day.

We examined the published airline schedules for the 15 airports reviewed to identify where the potential exists for continued or new problems this summer. We compared those schedules, in 15-minute increments, with the average capacity in optimum weather conditions and under instrument flight conditions for each airport. If the level of demand shown in the schedules and in the FAA-approved operations materializes this summer, we see the potential for continued or increased delays at the following airports:

- **Minneapolis-St. Paul:** Unlike last year's crew and runway problems, this summer's schedules show new, severe peaking throughout the day, pointing to a potential repeat of high delay levels. For example, Northwest Airlines has 56 departures scheduled in one 15-minute period—nearly 3 times the average departure capacity of the airport for that time.
- **Chicago O'Hare and New York LaGuardia:** The summer 2008 schedules at these two airports show more peaking in excess of optimum capacity than last summer, indicating the potential for worsened delay conditions.
- **JFK and Newark Liberty:** There is a potential for continued delay problems at these airports this summer. FAA's caps on operations at these airports are below the level of operations that airlines wanted to operate this summer. However, we found that the FAA-approved operations for this summer represent an increase in flights of 8.9 percent at JFK and 4.6 percent at Newark Liberty over last year's levels with more time-of-day peaking at both airports.

On a more positive note, published schedules for Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport show less peaking above capacity for summer 2008, which could help reduce delays at that airport.

Actions Needed in 2008 and 2009 To Mitigate Congestion

The long-term solution to customer dissatisfaction with air travel and reducing delays depends largely on expanding capacity through the Next Generation Air Traffic Management System (NextGen), which is targeted for 2025. Although FAA is exploring ways to accelerate NextGen, much work remains to set realistic expectations for when its capacity-enhancing capabilities can be delivered. Therefore, it will be important to keep efforts on track that show promise for enhancing capacity over the next 5 years. These efforts include new airport infrastructure projects at six airports, new procedure development, and airspace redesign efforts.

Ongoing Efforts To Enhance Efficiency and Better Manage Delays

Since last spring, DOT, FAA, and various stakeholders have identified a wide range of initiatives to reduce delays in the near-, mid- and long-term, particularly in the New York area. Specifically, the ARC recommended over 77 initiatives, and FAA organized these into 3 categories: 26 short-term initiatives that can be completed within 12 months, 7 mid-term initiatives that can be completed by the end of fiscal year 2009, and 44 long-term initiatives with completion dates still to be determined.

The 26 short-term initiatives are primarily procedural initiatives, such as re-routing arrival and departure routes and reducing excessive spacing of aircraft on final approach into the New York area airports. According to FAA, eight of the short-term initiatives are already in place, such as utilizing multiple runways at JFK to improve throughput. Overall, FAA plans to have all the short-term initiatives in place by year end. FAA also hopes to have as many as these initiatives in place as possible by this summer, as they may directly reduce delays.

The 51 mid- and long-term initiatives primarily consist of technological and capital infrastructure efforts, such as installing the new Airport Surveillance Detection Equipment-Model X (ASDE-X) ground surveillance systems at Newark and JFK, improving taxiways at JFK, and adding NextGen automation systems.

DOT and FAA also proposed amendments to the Department's policy regarding airport rates and charges. The amendments are intended to allow operators at congested airports flexibility when varying charges based on the time of day and air traffic volume and when including the cost of projects designed to expand capacity in the new landing fees.

It is important to note that ongoing and planned initiatives are not intended to significantly boost capacity but rather to enhance efficiency and better manage delays. While capping hourly operations at JFK and Newark may alleviate the over-scheduling at peak times, history shows that caps do not necessarily translate into a significant reduction in delays or an increase in airline on-time performance. For example, flight caps at Chicago O'Hare have been in place since 2004, and although delays have stabilized, they still occur at about 25 percent annually, with a delay rate of 31 percent last summer.

Near-Term Solutions Are Urgently Needed

With this in mind, we see several near-term actions that are needed to reduce congestion and delays. Specifically:

- **Making Better Use of "Special-Use Airspace:"** FAA needs to negotiate a plan with the Department of Defense (DOD) for use of special-use airspace to open up additional lanes of traffic at specific chokepoints this summer.

Before the Thanksgiving and Christmas holiday travel periods last year, DOT worked with DOD to open up special-use airspace along the east and west coasts to help mitigate delays during these heavy traffic periods. This effort proved to be effective in reducing delays. Special-use airspace is often inactive (i.e., not utilized for military purposes), thus offering potential options for more direct routing of civilian flights and additional paths to alleviate airspace congestion. Industry groups noted that “repeatable procedures” need to be developed to enhance coordination between military managers of special-use airspace on each coast and at FAA’s command center during periods of severe weather.

- **Continuing to Address Concerns and Excessive Spacing on Final Approach and Enhancing Controller Productivity:** FAA needs to continue to address concerns about controller productivity and excessive spacing on final approach as it trains large numbers of new controllers. Air Traffic Organization officials commented that concerns about excessive spacing extends beyond New York facilities. FAA developed a new tool to help monitor spacing and embarked upon educational efforts for controllers in both the en route and terminal lines of business. FAA is also developing new performance measures and policies to ensure efficiency without jeopardizing safety. We will continue to monitor these efforts.
- **Expanding FAA’s Airspace Flow Program:** FAA needs to further expand the number of its Airspace Flow Program locations—locations chosen for their combination of heavy traffic and frequent bad weather—to help reduce delays. This program gives airlines the option of flying longer routes to safely maneuver around storms and has successfully reduced delays. The program, which is managed by FAA’s command center, should also be utilized in heavy traffic conditions to space en route traffic to create gaps, thereby enabling ground-delayed traffic to depart more quickly.
- **Updating Capacity Benchmarks:** An important first step in addressing the delay problem in the 2000 timeframe was to develop a set of “capacity benchmarks” for the Nation’s top 30 airports. However, FAA has not published updated capacity benchmarks since 2004.

As we have noted in the past, establishing benchmarks is critical to understanding airline scheduling practices and what relief can be expected from technology and new runways. At the very least, benchmarks provide a common framework for understanding what maximum arrival and departure rates can physically be handled at the busiest airports under good and poor weather conditions, by time of day. Given the projected demand, FAA needs to update the benchmarks.

- **Keeping Planned Airport Infrastructure and Airspace Projects on Track:** FAA reports that new runways provide the largest increases in capacity.

Currently, runway projects at five airports (including projects at Washington Dulles and Chicago O'Hare) are planned to be built by 2012. 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.

- **Monitoring Airline Scheduling Practices:** The airlines should make every attempt possible to level out the arrival and departure banks at their large-hub airports to create more manageable flight operations at peak times at these airports.

Since the airline industry is opposed to the Department's proposal to allow the Nation's busiest airports to charge higher landing fees during peak travel times, as an alternative, the airlines should voluntarily reduce peak scheduling. Airlines have successfully conducted re-scheduling (i.e., de-peaking) at hub airports in the past. Following the summer of 2000, several major airlines voluntarily adjusted their flight schedules in early 2001, which helped to reduce congestion and delays at several major airports. It is time for the airlines to again consider adjusting their schedules to disperse flights from peak periods of demand to less congested periods.

For the 15 airports reviewed, we examined the published flight schedules for this summer to identify where airlines have scheduled more flights than the airports are capable of handling without delays. Without further adjustments to arrival and departure levels during peak periods, we see the potential for ongoing delay problems for the summer of 2008 at the three New York airports—JFK, Newark Liberty, and LaGuardia—along with Chicago O'Hare and Minneapolis. Delays at any one of these airports will have a "ripple effect" across the National Airspace System.

As we have noted in the past, BTS should perform an analysis of the Official Airline Guide schedule for all carriers (majors, nationals, regional, commuters, and small air carriers) to determine what, if any, changes in air carrier schedules have occurred and how they have contributed to the reduction in flight delays so far this year. This effort should be reconvened before this summer.

- **Expanding the Parameters for Targeting Chronically Delayed or Cancelled Flights:** In May 2007, DOT's Office of Aviation Enforcement and Proceedings initiated an industry-wide investigation of airlines' chronically delayed flights and took enforcement action against carriers for any flights that were chronically delayed. This is an important step forward.

Currently, DOT considers a flight to be chronically delayed if it operates more than 15 minutes late, more than 70 percent of the time in any calendar quarter. However, these parameters need expanding. DOT's current parameters identify

less than 200 regularly scheduled flights¹¹ per quarter as chronically late and, therefore, do not accurately portray the magnitude of chronically delayed flights.

We found that expanding the parameters to:

- 30 minutes late or more, 50 percent or more of the time, results in a total of 2,789 regularly scheduled flights that were chronically delayed.
- 30 minutes late or more, 40 percent or more of the time, results in a total of 5,369 regularly scheduled flights that were chronically delayed.

Targeting so few flights when delays and related passenger complaints continue to rise does not send a message to the airlines that delayed flights, especially chronically delayed flights, will not be tolerated.

- **Improving Airside Procedures:** The airports, in collaboration with FAA, need to work on procedural improvements, such as more efficient use of taxi-ways and runways. In its December 2007 “Flight Delay Task Force Report,” the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey identified “improvements to ground traffic movement” as one near-term recommendation to minimize delays at the JFK, LaGuardia, and Newark Liberty airports. Improvements to ground movement enable aircraft to taxi more quickly and safely between runways and terminals.

FAA is exploring ways to accelerate deployment of ASDE-X technology at JFK to improve surface operations. However, we note that ASDE-X was designed as runway safety technology—not a surface management system and, therefore, software modifications will be required. Once experience is gained, FAA should consider expanding this capability to other locations.

- **Following Through on Conducting Incident Investigations:** In our September 25, 2007, report, we recommended that DOT’s Office of General Counsel—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. To address this recommendation, DOT assigned this responsibility to the national task force on contingency planning. Since the national task force’s initial meeting on February 26, 2008, there have been several missed opportunities to investigate incidents involving long, on-board delays.
- **Analyzing Causes of Delays and Cancellations:** To accurately assess the primary cause of delays, BTS needs to analyze the “late arriving aircraft” category to identify the driving factors of delays and allocate those factors across the other

¹¹ A regularly scheduled flight is a flight segment representing a city pair (e.g., Chicago to Miami).

categories—carrier-caused, weather conditions, the National Airspace System, and security. This type of analysis should also be done for flight cancellations, but no agency currently conducts this analysis. Until this step is completed, the *root causes* of delays cannot be determined with any degree of precision.

The record-breaking flight delays and cancellations of last summer underscore the degree to which passengers are inconvenienced when traveling by air. The traveling public knows the aviation system needs improvement, and actions are needed by the airlines, airports, FAA and DOT if consumer confidence is to be restored.

As we testified in September 2007,¹² 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. The following is an assessment of DOT's, FAA's, the airlines', and airports' progress in implementing the actions outlined in our September 2007 testimony before the House Subcommittee on Aviation.

DOT, the Airlines, and Airports Have Progressed Toward Improved Customer Service, but Much Work Remains

Since we last testified, DOT, the airlines, and airports have begun initiatives to address the action items we outlined at that hearing. Specifically, these actions are in response to outstanding recommendations to improve airline customer service and minimize long, on-board delays (see figure 9).

Departmental Efforts

In our September 2007 report, we made a series of recommendations to the Secretary of Transportation to improve the accountability, enforcement, and protection afforded to air travelers. One such recommendation requires 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

Figure 9. Actions Outlined in September 2007 To Improve Airline Customer Service and Minimize Long, On-Board Delays

We recommended that:

- DOT conduct incident investigations involving long, on-board delays.
- DOT's Enforcement Office oversee the airlines' policies for dealing with long, on-board delays.
- BTS implement the necessary changes in the airlines' on-time performance reporting to capture all long, on-board delays.
- Airlines clarify terms in their contingency plans.
- Airlines establish specific targets for reducing chronically delayed or cancelled flights.
- Airlines disclose on-time flight performance.
- Airlines resume efforts to self-audit customer service plans.
- Airlines reconvene the contingency planning task force.
- Airports implement processes for monitoring lengthy delays.

¹² OIG Testimony Number CC-2007-099 "Actions Needed To Improve Airline Customer Service and Minimize Long, On-Board Delays," September 26, 2007.

durations before deplaning passengers, and (c) incorporate such policies in its contract of carriage¹³ and post on its Internet site.

The Department has begun addressing our recommendations by using its regulatory authority to issue rulemakings and to establish Federal advisory committees. However, most of the initiatives the Department is proposing will not be in place by this summer.

Actions Initiated Under Rulemaking

DOT has initiated actions to address each recommendation (10 recommendations in total) using two rulemakings as the primary vehicle to enhance airline passenger protections.

BTS Rulemaking Issued in November 2007: BTS issued a rulemaking proposing to collect additional data elements when flights are cancelled, diverted, or returned to the gate. The additional proposed data elements would fill in data gaps, thereby providing a more accurate portrayal of on-ground delays. *BTS expects to issue its final rule in August 2008, with October 1, 2008, as the effective date of the airlines' new reporting requirements.*

Delay statistics that airlines are reporting to BTS do not accurately portray the magnitude of long, on-board delays because (1) if a flight taxies out, sits for hours, and then taxies 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.

Also, airlines 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 Airways flights at JFK on February 14, 2007. On that day, JetBlue's JFK operations suffered when severe weather hit the northeastern United States, leading to 355 cancellations; 6 diversions; and 26 on-board delays exceeding 4 hours on flights that were later cancelled.

It is also true for flights with lengthy delays at airports where flights were diverted and then cancelled, such as some of the American Airlines flights diverted to Austin-Bergstrom International Airport on December 29, 2006. On that day, American's operations at DFW were severely affected by unprecedented weather; this led to 654 flight cancellations, 124 diversions, and 44 on-board delays exceeding 4 hours.

¹³ 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.

The diversions to Austin-Bergstrom generated substantial interest because some of the lengthiest on-board delays occurred at that airport—in one case for over 9 hours.

DOT Rulemaking Issued in November 2007: DOT issued a rulemaking seeking comments on whether the Department should adopt a rule to enhance airline passenger protections that would require airlines to:

- *Adopt contingency plans for lengthy tarmac delays and incorporate them in their contracts of carriage.* Each plan would require, among other things, the maximum tarmac delay that the airline will permit; the amount of time on the tarmac that triggers the plan's execution; a plan to meet passengers' essential needs, such as food, water, and lavatory facilities; and assurance that the plan has been coordinated with the airport operator.
- *Respond to consumer problems.* Each airline would be required to designate a consumer advocate who resides at the airline's system operations center and at each airport dispatch. The consumer advocate would be part of the team that is responsible for monitoring the impact of flight delays, cancellations, and long, on-board delays and would provide input on decisions concerning which flights are cancelled and which flights are subject to long, on-board delays. The advocate would also be required to respond to each passenger complaint within 30 days.
- *Publish delay data on their Internet sites.* Each airline would be required to report its prior month's on-time performance to include the percentage of on-time arrivals and arrivals more than 30 minutes late, flights that were late more than 50 percent of the time, and percentage of cancellations. Currently, the airlines are required to disclose on-time performance only upon request from customers. To date, only 5 of 12 ATA airlines report on-time performance 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 and without prompting.
- *Publish complaint data.* Each airline would be required to disclose on its Internet sites the number of complaints received regarding tarmac delays, missed connections, and failures to meet passengers' essential needs affected by delayed or cancelled flights.
- *Report on-time performance for international flights.* Currently, U.S. airlines that account for at least 1 percent of the domestic scheduled passenger revenue are only required to report on-time performance for domestic flights. This provision would require those airlines to report on-time performance for international flights to and from the United States. This provision would also require the largest foreign airlines to report on-time performance for their flights to and from the United States.

- *Audit their compliance with their customer service plans.* This provision dates back to a recommendation we made in our 2001 report. The ATA airlines agreed to establish quality assurance and performance measurement systems and conduct internal audits to measure compliance with the Commitment provisions and customer service plans. Only a few ATA airlines have them in place today.

The rule also would declare the operation of flights that remain chronically delayed to be an unfair and deceptive practice and unfair method of competition, as we recommended in our November 2006 report.¹⁴ In that report, we noted that another option for curbing congestion is for DOT to investigate unrealistic scheduling of flights by any air carrier. These flights are referred to as “chronically delayed.” When we issued our report, we reported that for 2005, there were 15,640 unique flight numbers (215,016 individual flights) that were chronically delayed or cancelled, affecting an estimated 16 million passengers. For 2007, several of those numbers increased significantly—there were 10,935 unique flight numbers (291,547 individual flights) that were chronically delayed or cancelled, affecting an estimated 19.4 million passengers.

DOT’s view at that time was that the flights that are chronically delayed are mostly due to reasons beyond the air carriers’ control—mostly weather but also congestion. As a result, in DOT’s view, a successful enforcement action for unrealistic scheduling would be difficult at best. Nevertheless, we recommended that DOT 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. In May 2007, DOT’s Office of Aviation Enforcement and Proceedings initiated an industry-wide investigation of airlines’ chronically delayed flights and took enforcement action against carriers for any flight that is “chronically delayed”¹⁵ and was not corrected by the second calendar quarter thereafter.

Actions Initiated Under the Federal Advisory Committee Act

As we recommended, DOT established a national task force of individuals who represent a cross-section of government agencies, airlines, airports, consumer groups to develop model contingency plans for minimizing the impact of long, on-board delays.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ DOT defines a chronically delayed flight as a flight that operates at least 45 times over calendar quarter and is late more than 70 percent of the time by 15 minutes or more.

The task force will undertake the following initiatives:

- Develop model contingency plans for minimizing the impact of lengthy tarmac delays.
- Be responsible for reviewing incidents involving long, on-board delays and their causes; identify trends and patterns of such events; and recommend workable solutions for mitigating the passenger impact of extraordinary flight disruptions.
- Review existing airline and airport contingency plans identifying best practices for extended tarmac delays.
- Report the results of its efforts and a description of the model contingency plan developed to the Secretary.

The task force held a kick-off meeting on February 26, 2008, with a second meeting planned for April 29, 2008. At the February 26 meeting, Office of Inspector General staff presented their perspectives on actions needed to minimize long, on-board delays. Two working groups were established—one on passenger needs and the other on delay causes—with reports to be presented at the April 29 meeting.

The Department has moved quickly to address our recommendations. 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. However, most of the initiatives will not be in place by this summer. Also, recommendations from the national task force to the Secretary are scheduled for submission in August 2008, when summer air travel is in decline. Therefore, the airlines and airports must follow through on their plans to reduce delays and improve airline customer service—without waiting for the outcome of the rulemakings or the national taskforce's recommendations.

The Airlines Have Begun Their Own Customer Service Initiatives, but Further Actions Are Needed

At the September 2007 hearing, we testified that many of the actions to improve airline customer service and minimize long, on-board delays 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. As we emphasized at that hearing—the key for each of these actions is execution. We conducted a follow-up examination on progress made to implement these actions. We found, for the most part, that the airlines under review have begun initiatives to improve air travelers' experiences, but more action is needed. The following summarizes the Air Transport Association (ATA) member-airlines' progress to date in response to our recommendations.

Clarify Terms in Airlines' Contingency Plans. In examining the ATA member-airlines' contingency plans, we found that:

- Eleven of 12 ATA member airlines have defined “an extended period of time” for meeting passengers’ essential needs during long, on-board delays. Two airlines consider this internal policy not publicly available, three have incorporated it into their customer service plans and placed it on their Internet sites, and six have incorporated it into their contracts of carriage—only then does it become legally enforceable by the customer against the airline.

The trigger thresholds for meeting passengers’ essential needs vary from a half-hour to 2 hours on arrival and from 1.5 hours to 3 hours on departure. We think it is unlikely that passengers’ definition of an extended period of will vary depending upon which airline they are flying. We are still of the view that a consistent policy across the airlines would be helpful to passengers.

- Eleven of the 12 ATA airlines have now set a time limit on delay durations before deplaning passengers or elevating the situation to senior operational managers for resolution. Three airlines consider this as an internal policy, only one has incorporated it into its customer service plan, and seven have incorporated this into their contracts of carriage. The trigger thresholds for deplaning passengers vary from a half-hour to 5 hours on arrival and 1 hour to 5 hours on departure (see table 3).

**Table 3. Selected Airlines' Terms and Conditions
for Handling Long, On-Board Delays**

Airline	Definition of Extended Period of Time Stated in Customer Service Plans and/or Contracts of Carriage	Time to Deplane Stated in Customer Service Plans and/or Contracts of Carriage
Alaska	90 Minutes	2 Hours for Arrivals
Aloha	None	None
American	2 Hours	4 Hours
Continental	2 Hours	2 Hours for Arrivals 4 Hours for Departures
Delta	1 Hour for Arrivals 2 Hours for Departures	At 1 Hour Elevate Up* (Arrivals) At 2 Hours Elevate Up* (Departures)
Hawaiian	2 Hours	2 Hours
JetBlue	1 Hour	5 Hours
Midwest	30 Minutes for Arrivals 1 Hour for Departures	30 Minutes for Arrivals 1 Hour for Departures
Northwest	1 Hour for Arrivals 3 Hours for Departures	1 Hour for Arrivals 3 Hours for Departures
Southwest	2 Hours	2 Hours
United	2 Hours	90 Minutes for Arrivals 4 hours for Departures
US Airways	1 Hour	At 3 Hours Elevate Up*

* Point in time when situation is elevated to senior management for a decisive action.

Establish Specific Targets for Reducing Chronically Delayed or Cancelled Flights. Between 2000 and 2007, the number of chronically delayed flights has increased nearly 27 percent (from 229,961 to 291,547). Likewise, the number of unique flight numbers that are chronically delayed month after month has also increased, with those delayed 6 months or longer increasing nearly 57 percent (380 to 595) over this time period. Overall, 19.4 million passengers were impacted by chronically delayed flights in 2007.

In 2001, and in subsequent reports, we recommended that the airlines establish specific targets for reducing chronically delayed or cancelled flights. To date, we found:

- Nine of the 12 airlines monitor chronically delayed or cancelled flights based on BTS criteria.
- Four of the 12 airlines have established a “zero tolerance” target for reducing chronically delayed and cancelled flights.
- Only three of the four airlines publish any information about chronically delayed flights and how they handle them in their customer service plans—a lost opportunity to educate the public on the efforts the airlines are taking to reduce delays.

The following examples are ways in which airlines can reduce chronically delayed flights.

- Increasing the block times (often referred to as “padding the schedule”) of the flight. This is generally not a good idea for economic reasons—increased block time can result in fewer flights segments for each aircraft for each operating day resulting in lost revenue.
- Pairing entire flight crews together throughout a day to minimize potential disruptions generated by separating aircraft and crew.
- Working with FAA to find alternative departure routings especially for flights departing from the New York area.

Disclose On-Time Flight Performance at Time of Booking Without Prompting and On Internet Sites. None of the 12 ATA airlines have completely satisfied our recommendation to disclose on-time flight performance at time of booking without prompting and post it on their Internet sites. We found that:

- Nine of the 12 airlines will disclose the prior month’s on-time flight performance upon request only. We tested five of the airlines’ compliance with providing the performance data upon request through their reservations agents and they were in compliance.

- Only 5 of 12 ATA airlines are placing the flights' prior month, on-time performance on their Internet sites. In this case, several airlines are awaiting the final outcome of the Department's proposed rulemaking on this matter.

Resume Efforts To Self-Audit Customer Service Plans. We recommended in 2001, and in subsequent reports, 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. To date, only 5 of the 12 airlines are still performing self-audits of the Commitment's provisions, while others have a self-audit system that does not include all the Commitment provisions. These airlines may be awaiting the outcome of the Department's rule on this matter. In its rule, the Department proposes to require that airlines establish quality assurance and performance measure systems and conduct internal audits to measure compliance with the Commitment provisions. It is our view that there is nothing in the Department's rule to prevent the airlines from self-policing themselves, just as they had promised to do back in 2001.

While some airlines are making a concerted effort to improve the passenger experience, others are not willing to formally promise all their Commitment provisions and associated customer service policies in their contracts of carriage or customer service plans. It is still our opinion that the airlines need to publish their promises to customers in writing regarding long, on-board delays. This would hold the airlines to a higher standard and clearly demonstrate that they take customer service matters very seriously.

Airports Are More Involved in Contingency Planning for Extraordinary Events, but Further Action Is Needed

Since we last testified, airports have moved out with initiatives to mitigate long, on-board delays and minimize passenger discomfort, but more is still needed. Airports have taken several actions since September 2007 to address these matters, such as convening a task force to address flight delays and customer service issues. However, individual airports can do more to enhance passengers' experiences, especially during extraordinary flight disruptions.

Convening a Task Force and Workshops Among Stakeholders To Address Flight Delays and Customer Service Issues in the New York Area

In our prior testimony, we reported that the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey convened a task force in July 2007 composed of Port Authority staff, airline executives, Federal, state, and city government officials, and other industry stakeholders in the region's aviation system to focus on the burgeoning problem of flight delays, including initiatives to improve the passenger experience when delays occur.

The task force issued its report on December 6, 2007, identifying a total of 96 recommendations to enhance capacity, reduce delays, and improve customer service for the region's three major airports—JFK, LaGuardia, and Newark Liberty. Nineteen of the recommendations address improving customer service through better communication with passengers and coordination among airlines, airports, and the various service providers.

Key customer service recommendations include:

- Establishing a baseline maximum time for a plane to sit on tarmac before the Port Authority must be notified to prepare support services.
- Creating an “early warning” system to inform passengers of delay before arrival at the airport terminal.
- Providing delayed passengers with information on alternate flights and transportation to allow sooner arrival at their final destination.

The task force intends to meet in early this summer to assess the implementation status of the recommendations in its report.

Convening Workshops Composed of Vested Stakeholders To Address Contingency Planning for Extraordinary Flight Disruptions

Two workshops were convened—one sponsored by DFW and the other sponsored by Airports Council International-North America (ACI)—to identify best practices for contingency planning during extraordinary flight disruptions. A cross-section of airports, airlines, government agencies, and industry vendors attended the workshops. Highlights from the workshop action items include the following:

- Identified and explored the causes of the public's concern that airports and airlines lack awareness of or fail to adequately prepare for Irregular Operations as they continue to take proactive measures to address customer needs.
- Acknowledged that better communication, collaboration, and coordination between all stakeholders (the airlines, airports, the Transportation Security Administration and FAA)—before and during an event—will dramatically improve the level of customer service to passengers.

Breakout sessions were held to, among other things, identify a “tool box” of templates, best practices, and communication plans for dealing with flight disruptions and passenger care.

Monitoring Tarmac Delays and Assisting Airlines During Flight Disruptions

In our last testimony, it was our view then, as it is now, that 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.

In support of our view, on January 7, 2008, Secretary Peters, sent letters to the Presidents of ACI and the American Association of Airport Executives “urging them and their members to take immediate steps to address our recommendation if they have not already done so.”

Since then, we found that the ACI member-airports selected for review are, to some degree, getting more involved in contingency planning for extraordinary events. For example, of the 20 airports we reviewed:

- Four currently do not have a process for monitoring extended ground delays.
- Only three have established policies and procedures to proactively monitor and minimize the impact of long, on-board delays that involves contacting the airline to request a plan of action after an aircraft has remained on the tarmac for 1 hour to 2 hours.
- The remaining 13 monitor delays as part of their normal operations but do not have formalized, written policies outlining the monitoring procedures and/or timeframes for taking action.

Also, 8 of the 20 airports have either refined their existing policies or established new policies to identify the resources and procedures needed to, upon request, assist airlines in extended ground delays, such as identifying remote areas for parking aircraft when gates are not available and methods to transport passengers from remote parking areas to the terminal.

Investigating Incidents of Extended Delays To Identify Causal Factors and Mitigate Future Occurrences

Following an extraordinary flight disruption event, airports conduct post-incident investigations on what contingency planning procedures work well during the event, and what did not. Of the 20 airports we reviewed:

- Fourteen conduct investigations of long, on-board flight delays.
- Twelve of the 14 airports’ investigations include a debriefing after the event with all involved stakeholders.
- Six either do not or rarely investigate long, on-board flight delays. This is sometimes contingent on whether the airport is the possible cause of the delays. Four of those six airports do not consider it necessary to investigate long, on-board flight delays because they seldom occur at their airports.

To minimize or mitigate future occurrences, airports have implemented solutions, ranging from continuous monitoring of a long, on-board flight delay until resolved to purchasing specialized equipment to better manage and prevent long, on-board flight delays. The criteria to trigger an airport investigation vary among the airports and can range from a 2- to 4-hour delay or the mere occurrence of any irregular or extraordinary event. Airports indicated that weather and flight diversions were the primary causes of long, on-board flight delays.

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.