

June 2, 2022

The Honorable Pete Buttigieg
Secretary
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue SE
Washington, D.C. 20590

Dear Secretary Buttigieg,

We are extremely concerned by reports that thousands of flights were delayed and cancelled this past weekend, adding to the mass delays and cancellations that snarled air travel in recent months. These disruptions are particularly frustrating as consumers return to the skies in record numbers, expecting to enjoy overdue vacations with loved ones. Too many travelers had their Memorial Day weekends ruined. We write to seek an update on the steps the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) is taking to hold airlines accountable for serious disruptions and to ensure consumers are wholly and justly compensated.

While some flight cancellations are unavoidable, the sheer number of delays and cancellations this past weekend raises questions about airline decision-making. Nearly 2,800 flights were cancelled over Memorial Day weekend on multiple airlines, including Delta Air Lines, American Airlines, and JetBlue Airways. The airlines attributed the cancellations to inclement weather, air traffic control actions, and increased COVID-19 cases.¹ We understand that some of these factors are outside of the airlines' control and appreciate the airlines' efforts to staff up as passenger air travel volumes increase and to notify passengers as early as possible of flight delays and cancellations, but thousands of passengers are still turning up at airports only to have their flights cancelled at the last minute, preventing them from reaching their destinations. Such occurrences pose significant hardships to the travelling public, and we are disappointed that these delays and cancellations are occurring so frequently that they are becoming an almost-expected part of travel.² We urge the airlines to take all necessary steps to mitigate those disruptions.

Flight cancellations and delays can also impose significant financial consequences on passengers. Under federal law, airlines must fully refund consumers when the airline cancels or

¹ Anne D'Innocenzio, "Memorial Day air travelers face thousands of cancellations, delays over holiday weekend," *USA Today*, May 28, 2022, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/travel/airline-news/2022/05/28/flight-cancellations-memorial-day-travelers/9979253002/>; David Shepardson, "U.S airlines cancel 2,500 flights over Memorial holiday weekend," *Reuters*, May 30, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-airlines-cancel-2500-flights-over-memorial-holiday-weekend-2022-05-30/>.

² Last week, the *New York Times* published an article that broke down the steps consumers should take if their flight is delayed or cancelled. Concepción de León and Ceylan Yeginsu, "Your Flight Has Been Canceled or Delayed. What Should You Do?" *New York Times* (New York, NY), May 27, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/flights-cancelled-delayed.html>.

significantly delays their flight, and we expect the airlines to comply with that legal mandate for travelers whose flights were cancelled this weekend. Consumers also lose money in other ways due to flight delays and cancellations, including for nonrefundable hotel reservations or tickets for events at their destination. In other words, the financial consequences for flight disruptions extend beyond the price of the plane ticket. Earlier notice about flight disruptions, at the very least, can help consumers find alternative transportation or mitigate their losses. Moreover, despite our repeated requests that the airlines offer cash refunds to consumers who cancelled their flights during the COVID-19 pandemic, they have refused to do so. Instead, many airlines have offered flight credits with expiration dates that are now rapidly approaching. We strongly urge airlines to do right by consumers as they provide compensation for any flight disruptions.

Given these recent flight disruptions and the impending surge in summer travel, please provide information on the steps DOT is taking in response to this past weekend's cancellations, both to reduce the likelihood of sweeping delays and cancellations from reoccurring and to ensure impacted consumers receive full compensation, including refunds.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



RICHARD BLUMENTHAL
United States Senate



EDWARD J. MARKEY
United States Senate