

United States Senate

December 20, 2023

Nicholas Calio
President
Airlines for America
1275 Pennsylvania Ave NW, Suite 1300
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Mr. Calio,

Crowded airports, flight delays, cancellations, and inclement weather have historically created nightmarish travel conditions for the public during the busy holiday travel season. Last year, these disruptions reached new heights when Winter Storm Elliott led to tens of thousands of flight cancellations, including thousands of Southwest Airlines flights for a full week after the storm. This year, as families make their air travel plans, purchase tickets, and board their flights, they will remember those disruptions. We write to urge major airlines to diligently plan and invest the necessary resources to minimize flight delays and cancellations over the next few weeks. Airlines must prioritize their consumers and take every possible step to ensure their travel is smooth, safe, and efficient this holiday season.

Air travel during the holidays last year was an unmitigated disaster. Winter Storm Elliot pummeled the northeast with record low temperatures and a huge amount of snow, resulting in serious disruptions to air travel. In December 2022, the airlines cancelled more than 30,000 flights and delayed another 142,000 — more than 31 percent of the total flights that month.¹ Although these disruptions were to some extent unavoidable, the storm also revealed that the airlines, particularly Southwest Airlines, were not prepared for the inclement weather. From December 27 to December 29, nearly a week after Elliott hit, Southwest canceled more than 7,500 flights, compared to all other airlines that canceled a combined 1,077 flights.² After-action reports revealed Southwest's antiquated crew scheduling processes failed to keep up with flight cancellations and reassign pilots and flight attendants.³ Remembering this holiday meltdown, families will undoubtedly experience significant anxiety and stress as they travel on any airline this holiday season.

¹ *On-Time Performance - Reporting Operating Carrier Flight Delays at a Glance*, BUREAU OF TRANSPORTATION STATISTICS, [HTTPS://WWW.TRANSTATS.BTS.GOV/HOMEDRILLCHART_MONTH.ASP?5RY_LRN4=FDFG&N44_QRY=E&5RY_PN44_VR4=DDD&5RY_NV42146=DDD&HEY_FRYRP6LRN4=FDFG&HEY_FRYRP6Z106U=M](https://www.transtats.bts.gov/HOMEDRILLCHART_MONTH.ASP?5RY_LRN4=FDFG&N44_QRY=E&5RY_PN44_VR4=DDD&5RY_NV42146=DDD&HEY_FRYRP6LRN4=FDFG&HEY_FRYRP6Z106U=M) (last accessed Dec. 15, 2023).

² All data on flight cancellations comes from FlightAware's public database. US Domestic and International Delays and Cancellations Report, FLIGHTAWARE, <https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/flightaware/viz/AirlineCancellationDelayUpdate/USAirlineCancellationsDelays>.

³ Niraj Chokshi & Peter Eavis, *Southwest's Meltdown Could Cost It Up to \$825 Million*, N.Y. Times (Jan. 6, 2023), <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/06/business/southwest-airlines-meltdown-costs-reimbursement.html>.

Unfortunately, last year’s holiday nightmare was no aberration. The holiday season is a reliably stressful and chaotic time to travel. In 2021, as COVID-19 cases surged, the airlines cancelled or delayed more than 24 percent of flights, some 130,000 trips.⁴ In fact, since 2012, December has been the third worst month to travel, with just 76.5 percent of flights arriving on time, compared to more than 84 percent in September.⁵ Only June and July are worse travel months.⁶ By now, airlines should be well aware of the staffing and logistical challenges that come with the holidays’ increased demands. We understand that the airlines cannot control the weather but we are concerned that the airlines have historically been unprepared for this busy travel season.

Additionally, the airlines’ performance this year raises questions about their preparation for this holiday season. Through September this year, just 76 percent of flights have arrived on time — the worst percentage since 2014.⁷ And these figures were particularly poor during the busy travel months of June and July, in which around only 70 percent of flights arrived on time.⁸ These numbers raise serious concerns about whether the airlines have taken sufficient steps and invested adequate resources this travel season to bring passengers to their chosen destinations on-time.

These cancellations and delays have real world consequences for travelers. Families lose precious time together over the holidays, earn less from missed work, and incur other financial costs. Any time spent delayed in the airport or stressfully attempting to rebook flights is time missed out with family and friends. The impact on travelers is evident from the thousands of complaints filed with the Department of Transportation (DOT). Last December, for example, consumers filed nearly 14,000 complaints, with the vast majority focused on flight delays and cancellations. More broadly, consumer complaints in the first quarter of this year soared by 88.4 percent compared to the same period in 2022.⁹ This rise in unpleasant travel experiences is unacceptable. Travelers should be “up in the air,” not their travel plans.

With travelers regularly experiencing disruptions, the Department of Transportation and the Biden administration are rightfully taking action to ensure airlines are held accountable for flight

⁴ These figures were calculated using data from the website of the Bureau of Transportation Statistics that the agency collects through its Airline Service Quality Performance System. To download the raw data, see *Airline On-Time Statistics and Delay Causes*, BUREAU OF TRANSPORTATION STATISTICS, https://www.transtats.bts.gov/OT_Delay/OT_DelayCause1.asp.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Just 75.8 percent and 76.5 percent of flights arrived on time in June and July, respectively, between 2012 and 2012. *Id.*

⁷ *On-Time Performance - Reporting Operating Carrier Flight Delays at a Glance*, BUREAU OF TRANSPORTATION STATISTICS, <https://www.transtats.bts.gov/homedrillchart.asp> (last accessed Dec. 15, 2023).

⁸ *On-Time Performance - Reporting Operating Carrier Flight Delays at a Glance*, BUREAU OF TRANSPORTATION STATISTICS, [HTTPS://WWW.TRANSTATS.BTS.GOV/HOMEDRILLCHART_MONTH.ASP?5RY_LRN4=FDGF&N44_QRY=E&5RY_PN44_VR4=DDD&5RY_NV42146=DDD&HEY_FRYRP6LRN4=FDGF&HEY_FRYRP6Z106U=M](https://www.transtats.bts.gov/HOMEDRILLCHART_MONTH.ASP?5RY_LRN4=FDGF&N44_QRY=E&5RY_PN44_VR4=DDD&5RY_NV42146=DDD&HEY_FRYRP6LRN4=FDGF&HEY_FRYRP6Z106U=M) (LAST accessed Dec. 15, 2023).

⁹ *Air Travel Consumer Report: March 2023, April 2023, May 2023, and 1st Quarter 2023 Airline Complaint Data*, Department of Transportation, <https://www.transportation.gov/briefing-room/air-travel-consumer-report-march-2023-april-2023-may-2023-and-1st-quarter-2023> (last accessed Dec. 15, 2023).

Mr. Calio
December 20, 2023
Page 3

delays and cancellations. Just this week, the Department of Transportation issued a \$140 million civil penalty against Southwest Airlines for its December 2022 meltdown. In May, the Department announced a proposed rule to compensate passengers for carrier-caused delays and cancellations. If finalized, this rule would require airlines to rebook delayed or cancelled flights and pay for costs associated with these delays such as food, transportation, and lodging. This rulemaking is a step in the right direction, and is similar to the European Union's model, which has been in place since 2004. However, while travelers wait for this rulemaking to be finalized, airlines must act on their own volition to do right by their consumers. This winter holiday season is an important opportunity for airlines to reverse the last ten years of bumpy travel around this time of year. But it requires airlines to engage in robust planning and investment.

The risk of flight delays, cancellations, and ruined vacations lurks in travelers' minds, creating more holiday fear than holiday cheer. In light of these concerns, we urge the major airlines to plan thoroughly and invest appropriately in mitigating the logistical and staffing challenges that this holiday season can expect to bring.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator