

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-1304

October 5, 2023

Mr. Nicholas E. Calio
President & Chief Executive Officer
Airlines for America
1275 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Suite 1300
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Mr. Calio:

I am writing to express my concern regarding ongoing challenges that airline passengers face, and to inquire what Airlines for America (A4A) is doing to address these complaints from the American people.

According to the U.S. Department of Transportation's (DOT) Air Travel Consumer Report (ATCR) of full-year 2022 data, air carriers reported higher rates of mishandled baggage and higher numbers of passengers who were involuntarily denied boarding, due to oversold flights or bumps, compared to pre-pandemic levels in 2019. This is despite the fact that passenger volumes in 2022 were still eight percent lower than pre-pandemic levels. In addition, despite U.S. airline passenger traffic increasing by only about 30 percent from 2021 to 2022—from 658 million passengers to 853 million passengers—the aforementioned report notes that tarmac delays greater than three hours increased by 142 percent in the same time period.

In addition to the above issues that consumers experienced during travel, my constituents have shared concerns about nontransparent prices and excessive fees. As you know, in 2008, A4A member airlines, including American and United, were among the first airline to institute a fee for checked baggage, a move that proved profitable and made the industry more than \$1 billion in excess baggage fees that year alone. In the years since, this practice of instating new fees has swelled significantly, leading to additional charges for add-ons like seat assignments, early boarding access, food and drinks, Wi-Fi service, and more.

In 2017, airlines generated roughly \$57 billion in add-on fees from passengers. These fees often leave consumers to select a ticket price they deem affordable, only to get hit with back-end fees as they navigate the increasingly confusing process of booking a flight, resulting in higher costs than ever before. And these increases do not appear to be slowing down; according to the Federal Reserve of St. Louis, the price of airline tickets increased by 25 percent from 2022 to 2023—the largest jump since it began tracking such prices.

Because of the concerns about airline booking and travel issues I have been hearing from my constituents, I have been taking a closer look at legislation introduced by my colleagues and Senator Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut and Senator Edward Markey of Massachusetts, the *Airlines Passengers' Bill of Rights* (S. 178). As you may know, their bill would expand an array

of protections for air travelers by ensuring that airlines provide passengers with refunds and compensation for delays and cancellations caused by the airlines, as well as for those who are denied boarding. It also would prohibit unnecessary fees and ensure consumers understand the true costs of flying.

I would like to know what A4A is doing to address the aforementioned issues, and would appreciate your timely response to the following questions:

1. In addition to DOT's full-year 2022 ATCR (in which the majority of reporting carriers are A4A members) showing that tarmac delays greater than three hours increased by 142 percent from pre-pandemic levels, the same report also shows that the rate of passengers involuntarily denied boarding due to oversold flights increased by 33 percent in the same time period. What is A4A doing to ensure a fair industry standard for airline passengers to be refunded or compensated for delayed and cancelled flights, as well as reduce involuntary denied boardings?
 - a. Do your efforts to obtain a satisfactory standard include funding for meals or lodging?
2. Despite 2022 air travel levels remaining lower than pre-pandemic levels, the full-year 2022 ATCR showed that the rate of mishandled baggage increased from 2019, and the rate of mishandled wheelchairs and scooters was unimproved from 2019. What is the reason for this increase in mishandling baggage and stagnancy in mishandling wheelchairs and scooters?
 - a. What efforts does A4A have in place to improve this metric?
3. As of July, A4A members United and American Airlines each reported quarterly profit of more than \$1 billion. What is A4A doing to ensure consumers are not saddled with excessive or unnecessary fees throughout their airline booking and travel experience?
 - a. How is A4A ensuring that the airline industry's profit is not earned at the expense of a fair, pleasant, and affordable travel experience for consumers?

I appreciate your attention to this matter and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator