

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell

Southwest Airlines Listening Session

Panelists: Veronica Gutierrez (Mount Vernon, WA); Hope Grandon (Seattle, WA); Rob Perkins (Vancouver, WA); Karen Hartman (Spokane, WA); Alex Kain (Bellevue, WA)

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you for helping to get everybody organized today, but specifically, thanks to the Washingtonians who are willing to share their stories about what happened during the transportation debacle over the Christmas holiday. I know that many of us saw stories on television, but now we're here trying to make sure that this never happens again, that is that we never leave people stranded without the communication or the resources to get to their destinations, when weather does allow. But many of you have your own individual stories. And I think that will help inform us as we go towards this hearing this week in Washington, DC. So thank you for being willing to share. I know many of you reached out to our offices. So I think I'm going to start with you, Veronica, and if you could just tell us what you think is important about what transpired, where you are today in getting refunds, and what we need to do to make sure this doesn't happen again.

Veronica Gutierrez: So, where I'm at right now with Southwest is they sent me an email, refunding me 50,000 points. I did respond to the email and told them that I would take the 50,000 points, but I also would like my money refunded to me. I have not heard anything back from them in regards to my, my financial refund. And then I'm sorry, what was the other question that you asked me?

Sen. Cantwell: Well, Veronica, tell me what happened to you. What, what were the circumstances by which you were traveling during this time period? Did you get to your destination?

Veronica Gutierrez: Uh no. So my son who's in I'm in Fort Stewart, Georgia, was supposed to arrive for his Christmas vacation. As you know, being in the military, you only have a certain amount of time to come home and visit with your family, and he only comes during the Christmas holiday.

He flew into California to pick up his younger brother, and they were both going to fly in to Washington. Southwest, who we've always flown, and have never had any issues with them, did not send an email or any kind of information, and my two boys were waiting at the airport, waiting to check in and had notified me that their flight had been delayed.

[They] gave a day and a time, which would be the following day, and then had it cancelled again without informing us what was going on. And I understand that the weather has a lot to do with it and that the airlines are understaffed. I understand that. But those things usually occur on the East Coast, and we were out here in the West Coast, and we didn't have any, we didn't have a weather condition that would prevent them to fly in.

We tried to find other flights. At first they were charging over 1000s of dollars just to fly from California to Washington, which was ridiculous. And we couldn't even find a single flight for them to come home. So I didn't get to see my son at all during the holiday season.

Sen. Cantwell: So he just flew back to the East Coast?

Veronica Gutierrez: He had to wait. He didn't find a flight back until after the New Year, actually the day that he was supposed to be on base and report, that's when he flew back. And my son had experienced an awful year in 2022, he had lost several members of his battalion due to suicide and to murder, so this was something that he really needed to come home and just feel family comfort around him during the holiday season. And so that that was my experience.

Sen. Cantwell: Veronica I'm so sorry that you didn't get to spend Christmas with your with your son, or sons. I'm sure that was very emotional for both of you. And I think you contacted our office, so we appreciate that, and we will follow through with Southwest about you getting a refund. So thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you for sharing.

Hope, do you want to go next?

Hope Grandon: Thank you. Like so many others, we unfortunately spent Christmas in an airport rather than with our family. Like so many others, we waited in line for over three and a half hours to rebook in person, only to have that rebooked flight also cancel.

When we reentered the line, after waiting another 90 minutes, we were told that there was no one left to work at the desk and that we would need to leave the airport without a plan. We left on Christmas night with no rental cars available to us, no flights left on other airlines after we were assured our rebooked flight at 11:30 PM was worth waiting for, and no option to reach our luggage.

Additional re-bookings, our planned return flights from Memphis, where we were trying to get for Christmas were also canceled, leaving us without our bags full of Christmas presents, our winter clothing, and more for nearly two weeks.

Out of care for his immunocompromised family members, this would have been the first year since the start of that pandemic that my boyfriend would be able to go home for Christmas. We pursued every avenue available to us to ensure that he wouldn't be absent for the third year in a row, including attempts to reroute through nearby airports and drive the rest of the way.

But by the time that by the time it became clear that we were wrong to sit tight as advised, any means of alternate transportation, planes, trains, automobiles, the full gamut were no longer available to us.

I appreciate the initial steps that Southwest has taken; every team member we've interacted with, whether it was the elderly man working the counter at DIA since three in the morning, or the baggage agents in Memphis, who finally tracked down our missing values using air tags

we'd stashed in our luggage, were warm and empathetic and have seemingly tried to do everything they could for us with very limited options.

That said, we would go weeks at a time without anything beyond a form letter response and were asked to take on the burden of several 1000s dollars of charges. We found our best source of information in other impacted travelers on online messaging boards and social media when we should have been able to rely on Southwest.

We were also fortunate enough to have savings and credit available to us to cover those charges. But even with those resources, it resulted in a lot of anxiety, wondering if we would in fact be reimbursed. I can't imagine how that would have been compounded if that delay had caused our accounts being over drafted, like it did for many travelers.

After nearly a month, we have been finally been reimbursed for the majority of our expenses. And it was a deep relief to get that balance off of our credit cards. But it was a fight to do so, and a fight that I don't think it was fair to ask travelers after the emotional baggage that we already took on.

Sen. Cantwell: So you haven't been fully reimbursed, Hope?

Hope Grandon: There's a little bit of rules that are coming out of the woodwork at the 11th hour, whether that be itemized receipts for meals over a certain amount, or baggage compensation stopping at the time they find your bags, not at the time your bags are returned to you. We're pretty tired of you know, three hours of wait times, so I think our instinct is to let some of that go, but it does just feel a little bit like insult to injury at this point.

Sen. Cantwell: How many times do you think or how many hours do you think you spent trying to communicate to them?

Hope Grandon: I mean, upwards of at least 20. I mean, I have some screenshots of phone calls that went three hours that were disconnected after standing in line for five hours that day at the airport, going back and forth on social media when we couldn't get anyone on the phone, I mean, I would say conservatively, 30 to 40 hours.

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you so much. So you never made it home to family at Christmas?

Hope Grandon: No, we stayed in Denver for an extra four days until we could get a flight back to Seattle.

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you for sharing. Next we're going to hear from Karen Hartman.

Karen Hartman: So I actually have a relatively good story in spite of certain inconveniences and such. So my husband and I had booked a flight from Spokane to Phoenix on the 30th. And because of the restrictive hotel policies for cancellations, we didn't book a hotel, we didn't reserve a hotel room in Phoenix until I think it was the 26th or 27th.

By that time we kind of thought oh this is great. Everything will be going the weather delays are in the in the rearview mirror and so there shouldn't be a problem.

We also booked our rental car which had, I think, a 24 hour cancellation policy. So later that day we didn't hear anything from Southwest Airlines. And within a day after we had booked our hotel and the rental car, we saw on the news that there were continuing delays for Southwest.

We hadn't heard anything for them so this is when we became concerned. And fortunately, we were within the time period so that we could cancel the hotel and cancel the rental car. We never heard from Southwest, I mean, not even a heads up, you know, hey, we might not be going and I'll keep watch on the app.

So for the days before our flight, we just tracked the same flight, it was a mid-afternoon flight, and it goes every day. So we track that flight. And it was canceled. We were leaving on Friday, it was canceled Tuesday, it was canceled Wednesday, and then it was canceled for Thursday. So when our Friday flight wasn't canceled, in the 24 hours in advance, as the other ones had been for the previous days, we figured, okay, well, this is good, we're going to be going.

And so but we still didn't book any hotels or rental cars until, I don't know, whether it was late in that day on the 29th or even early on the 30th. But it was it was at the end of that time period, because we want to make sure that our flight was going, and our flight did end up going. It left on time, the flight was fine, the airplane was fine. Everything was great.

But the stress leading up to it because I mean, we had reservations on at hotels, or had we had a rental car and if our flight hadn't gone, we would we would not have gotten that money back. There weren't flights for days after that. We tried to rebook on other airlines and so forth. And either they were outrageously expensive, or there just weren't any seats.

So we didn't suffer from any financial losses. As I say, we went on schedule and returned on schedule, and everything was fine. But just the lack of communication was unacceptable. I mean, at least you think give people a heads up so that they can you know, looking ahead, try to make arrangements or figure out what they're going to do.

Sen. Cantwell: Did you try to call them during this time period?

Karen Hartman: Oh, no, no, wait. I saw that there were long wait times. And it was just easier to check on the app and see if flights were being canceled. No, we didn't try to call we figured that we probably wouldn't get through.

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you. I know that this is one of the concerns, because a lot of people are trying to lean on the apps as a way of this is where we're moving to communication. But you're telling us something important that is that they're not really the perfected tool to communicate with at this point.

Karen Hartman: No, it was because I mean, there is no communication. It's just one way, the flight the day before the same flight has been canceled, and it was canceled 24 hours in

advance of that flight. So we could only guess as to what might happen with ours and that way if we hadn't been canceled, we thought well, we're probably going maybe we're going we'll go to the airport and see.

Sen. Cantwell: Well, thank you. Thank you so much for sharing. Thank you. Yes, thank you, Rob Perkins.

Rob Perkins: Good afternoon. So our circumstance was that we were trying to fly my daughter and her partner up from Burbank, California. After an unfortunate miscommunication by Amtrak, they would have been on the train if another logistical problem at another company hadn't gotten in the way of that.

We were able to secure tickets on the website for them for \$556 flying from Burbank to Oakland and onto PDX, onto Portland, Oregon. After they were checked in and they got to the counter, they were informed that the second leg of the flight was canceled.

Rachel asked them for a refund at the gate and ---- not at the gate, at the ticket counter --- and was refused because the first leg was not canceled, but the second leg was and they should take the first one and find out what to do.

They then offered them a flight from Burbank to Seattle over Sacramento, which would have come in around 11, 10:30, 11 o'clock that night. I could have the numbers wrong. I didn't write that down. So they flew to Sacramento, and at Sacramento they were waiting for their flight and it was canceled.

And Rachel got in line and got rebooked for another flight an hour later and it was canceled and then a third one, and it was canceled. And then finally, it's about two in the morning and they set up bookings for them to return to Burbank on the 23rd of December. So, there they were at home 21 hours later, 24 hours later, with no hotels or accommodations offered in Sacramento, they basically sat in waiting seats for an entire calendar day and tried to keep their luggage next to them.

We decided as a family, this being the first Christmas in the years that my entire family of five kids and their partners would be home with us for Christmas, so we decided to delay Christmas until the 27th and fly them out on the 26th. [They were] offered the same flight on Southwest website for the same price \$556. Before they could get to the airport, that flight had also entirely been canceled with no notice about whether or not there was a refund in that moment.

So on the 26th they had to go back home, and from their apartment, they had zoom Christmas with us on the 27th of December with most of the family there in person. And this caused some emotional sadness, nowhere to the degree, I think that the others have talked about and they talked about the loss they've been feeling, but still we missed them.

Even though they were on Zoom the way we are now, we just missed them and had to decide to schedule later on.

I, as far as the refunds go, I took some time to actually write a formal business letter making the claims for refunds. I contacted Chase Bank to arrange for the dispute of the charges, primarily there because the website notices were not clear, map notices were not clear. And we had tried to call Southwest and wait two hours on the phone and get disconnected anyway.

And just that same kind of experience as the others. Now fortunately for us, I did find the form on the Southwest website, you have to click through a lot of strange links to get there and filled it out for a refund for both of those canceled flights.

And to their credit, I will say the same thing that I think Hope said, everyone we talked to when we could talk to someone was kind and compassionate about it. We knew they were overwhelmed. We knew that stuff was happening behind the scenes. And it became evident that it was far more than weather.

And Southwest, I got some form letters saying they escalated our requests for refunds. And at this date, the refunds are in. So the \$1,112 that we spent has come back to us and we're in a place of income and privilege where we could float that money for that period of time without suffering.

It should be said too that on the way, [with] their experience in Sacramento, we had to drive from Vancouver, Washington to Seattle. And we actually got stuck in Tumwater after the weather really closed down on us that we started to get a hotel room there. And we found one. And we were actually texting back and forth while sitting in the hotel room to decide whether or not to continue the trip.

And again, about 2 AM. There, we were in Tukwila with the weather closed on us. So we were stuck there for two nights, while the ice and the storms in Vancouver had to clear in order for the roads to be cleared. And I imagined, I think that set us back about \$400 plus the price of gas. And we were in a car that we had borrowed from my son because he was the one with a car that could drive through that kind of weather.

And so I'm feeling pretty good about how Southwest has treated us given all that they had to do. I'm aware that their leadership had changed only eight months before but not long ago, you know, not soon enough to make the changes that would have prevented this.

And I'm hoping they will do what I expect them to take full responsibility and offer refunds to everyone who's talking here and everyone who needed it. I hope they can.

Sen. Cantwell: So Rob, you're you wouldn't have gone to Seattle to pick up your daughter if you didn't think that she was going there that night. So they kept telling her to go on to Northern California and then go to Seattle. So are you asking for reimbursements for your hotel?

Rob Perkins: I haven't tried to ask for reimbursements. We just wrote it off. Again, we're in an economic circumstance where we could treat that as a day off for the two of us, Rachel's mom and me, and just kind of enjoy it.

And there's great pizza place there in Tumwater and we had a reasonably good time considering all the weather. But it would have been so much nicer to have the family home for Christmas for the first time.

Sen. Cantwell: So thank you. And the last person we're going to hear from is Alex Kain.

Alex Kain: Hi, Senator, thank you for establishing this, really appreciate it. So our story actually begins before Christmas, on the 16th. We were flying from SeaTac through Midway -- Chicago, Midway to Albany were around where my family lives. And our flight was delayed in Midway because they could not find a crew to staff our plane. And so they had to assemble the crew at the very last minute.

And you know, this, these are the sorts of delays that you just come to expect every once in a while when you're flying a plane. And we arrived in Albany a couple hours later than we expected. We got a hotel near the airport, we thought that that was going to be our travel story for the holiday.

We were celebrating early to avoid the Christmas rush, and so you know, we went home to the Berkshires where my parents live. And, you know, had had a nice trip out there. And then we were flying back on December 23rd via Southwest. We were leaving Albany, and arriving in Denver, and then traveling up to SeaTac.

So we leave Albany on time, at around five o'clock, Eastern Time. And everything seemed to be going great, SeaTac was open again, they closed the runways for a little bit and so we were nervous about that. But we thought that luck was on our side.

We arrived in Denver, we land on time, and check our phones to discover that our flight from Denver to Seattle had been delayed by a couple hours. It was originally supposed to leave at around 11, it was now booked to leave at around midnight. So we thought okay, that's not so bad.

And then we saw that there were about four or five planes in front of us waiting to get to the gate on the tarmac. And that's when we knew something was wrong.

We sat on the tarmac for about an hour before we finally made it into the airport itself. And we saw that there were hundreds of people standing in line waiting to rebook their flights. Even before we could even get to our gate.

The moment we stepped out into the airport, we saw people crying, sleeping on the floor, there were lines at the restaurants because they were about to close. You know, we decided to get a bite to eat.

Even though the restaurants were technically supposed to be closed, one of them heroically stayed open long enough to serve as many people as they could before they were forced to close. And we knew that, you know, there was a flight before us to Seattle to SeaTac that was leaving about two hours before ours was scheduled to leave.

We knew that if that one took off on time, we were going to be okay. It did not take off on time, they boarded the people onto the plane and we watched them load the luggage onto the plane. And then an hour or two later, they unloaded the luggage from the plane. And everyone deplaned after sitting at the gate for hours.

And they were immediately just set loose. No one told them where to go or what to do. They just set them loose in the airport. And we knew that we weren't going to be leaving that airport for several days.

So very shortly thereafter, our flight which had been delayed two more times by that point to around 2:00 AM on Christmas Eve had been canceled. They told us to go wait in line and rebook our flight. And by this point, we had already heard stories from other people who've been waiting in the airport for two, three days already to rebook flights to get out of Denver. So we knew that if we stayed in that airport, we were not going to leave until well after Christmas.

So we found a hotel, we got a rental car -- the last rental car that we could find in the greater Denver area. And we drove from Denver all the way up to Redmond, Oregon. We didn't want to risk driving over the mountains, considering all the weather that had been going on, so we booked a flight from Redmond, Oregon to SeaTac and the whole trip cost us around \$3,000.

And, you know, we were traveling on Christmas Eve and Christmas. We were just driving and you know, Christmas dinner was at an Arby's so it was, you know, not the worst, not the best. Just Arby's. But, you know, it was it was certainly not the Christmas that we'd expected. And, you know, as everyone said, the actual staff, the human staff that we communicated with, for Southwest was very understanding and very caring, and clearly dealing with a system that was not accommodating to our interests or theirs.

But at the end of the day, we were able to get our luggage back two weeks later, we were able to get reimbursed mostly. There were a couple of receipts that we didn't have. And by that point, we just decided we would take the loss and get most of our money back.

And, yeah, that was a, it was quite the experience, but we only got that money back after haranguing them on Twitter DMs, which seems to be the only way that we could get any reliable communication from them. The app was not working. The phone service, as you've heard, was not helpful. Emails, not really a thing. It was only through Twitter DM, that we were able to get ahold of them, which was ridiculous. But yeah, I'd say that we're finally ready to put it all behind us and certainly not travel Southwest again anytime soon.

Sen. Cantwell: Well, thank you. Thanks, Alex. Thanks to all of you for sharing your stories. I mean, you're reminding all of us how special Christmas really is, and how important it is to be

with your loved ones. And that's all we were asking for. People were asking for those special moments, precious time to spend with their families. And so I'm sorry that it turned out that many of you didn't get that opportunity.

The issues that you're bringing up, we definitely want to try to address. We want to make sure that our airline system communicates. We all, and each one of you articulated this, understand weather and weather predicaments. But we still need to have communication. And we can't have a system that goes down for four days without anybody knowing what their outcome or their availability is, particularly when it happened on such a precious holiday season when people were trying to have those special moments with family.

So the other thing is, we definitely want to make sure that everyone is reimbursed for their expenses and costs. And so some of you have mentioned a few things we'll follow up with you individually about that if there is something that you're still concerned about, because we want to make sure that Southwest does honor this commitment, as it relates to refunds.

And then, you know, we want to plan for the future. We want to plan for a transportation system that isn't one-way communication, as you said, when they're telling you just the flight is canceled. But in this case, we needed a lot more information so people could make wiser choices about what their alternatives were going to be.

And that is what we need to make sure we have in the future. I just really appreciate all of you participating in this and telling us your stories. And it's been a tough couple of years in air transportation in general because of the COVID pandemic and we certainly want to make sure that we have a system, where again, as I mentioned that the communication of the customers are critical and critically important to them and their family. So I'm going to turn it back to you just to see if there is any questions from any of the press at this point in time. And then, if not, we'll see if there are any other points that the panelists want to bring up?

Ansley Lacitis (Communications Director for Sen. Cantwell): If you are a member the media if you can hit the question answer and indicate that you have a question or you can hit the raise hand function and we can call on you know, I'll give you a few seconds if you have any questions for any of the participants or the Senator.

We have Ian Duncan with Washington Post.

Ian Duncan (Washington Post): Senator thanks for doing this. I just wanted to see what is it that you're hoping to hear from Southwest on Thursday? What questions are you going to have for them? What do you think that they can tell you that might reassure you or just might inform how you're thinking about these issues?

CANTWELL: Well, it was clear that there was a system failure at Southwest and we want to understand why they haven't upgraded this system. That other airlines may have been better resourced, may have had more staffing, but clearly, they had a back end communication system

that led them after the initial weather event to cancel many days of travel and that left many of these constituents, that I just heard from, stranded in various parts of the country.

And so we want to understand why had that system not been updated? And what are they going to do now to make sure that that is fixed in the future? And, again, compensate people for their expenses.

Ansley Lacitis (Communications Director for Sen. Cantwell): David with NPR. There we go.

David Schaper (NPR): Senator, I'm wondering if you are supporting the – I don't know what they're calling it exactly – the Passenger Bill of Rights that Senator Markey and Senator Blumenthal have introduced? It's come up before but it hasn't gotten very far in the Senate.

Is that something you're supportive [of]? And if not, what other kinds of regulations would you like to impose on the airline industry?

Sen. Cantwell: I think the issue is that yes, we believe that past efforts in the FAA reauthorization bills that protect consumers are good ideas. And we're certainly going to make sure that there are consumer protections in this marketplace. We think protecting the consumer and making sure that they get the service that has been promised to them, and that the communication is there to communicate with them, particularly during a crisis like this. We don't think this is the last time a weather event or some particularly challenging event is going to hit our system, look at what we've just been through, a 100 year event.

So we definitely want to improve the communication to our customers. It can't be that you give a dividend at the end of the year, but then don't put the workforce in place to communicate to consumers who then have to spend days, or the stories that we've heard about people stranded not even knowing what their options are. So we think these are consumer protections and we believe that consumers deserve to have these kinds of protections in this particular service that they have basically paid for.

Ansley Lacitis (Communications Director for Sen. Cantwell): Okay, we have one time for one more question. Ryan Harris with Northwest News Radio.

Ryan Harris (Northwest News Radio): Hi, thank you, Senator. You know, one of the folks that was talking mentioned that their flight didn't have a crew to staff it. Are we considering, including in with this Passenger Bill of Rights or in separate legislation, excuse me, maybe a requirement for airlines, if they're going to book these flights, they should book them knowing they're going to have the staff to manage them?

CANTWELL: Well, definitely through this hearing that we're going to have this week and through the hearings we're going to have about FAA authorization, we are definitely going to talk about staffing.

When we ask the question, how is it that some airlines got through this process and seemed like they really, even though we had horrific weather all across the United States, seem to have

been able to operate and deliver very or fairly reliable service? I mean, I'm not saying no flights were canceled, but seem to be able to handle the interruptions. get people back on track, and communicate with customers. I'm not saying it was perfect. I'm just saying some were better than others.

And when you drill down on why -- it is because they staffed to the appropriate ratio to handle the events that we were dealing with. And again, we want to see an air transportation service that is reliable, as reliable as it can be given that there are natural events like weather, but that they are communications and people are communicated with.

In addition, no American should be stranded somewhere for four days without communication about what their options are. And the other thing is that when they were stranded, and they looked for alternatives, they were looking at extraordinary pricing or extraordinary circumstances that the system also didn't work well to help them continue on their ways.

In some instances, I'm sure there were, as all of these constituents said, you know, kind, thoughtful voices that we're trying to help them and trying to help them on their way, but this issue of staffing and communication is something we really have to deal with.

Ansley Lacitis (Communications Director for Sen. Cantwell): Thank you, everyone. We are at the end of our time allowed. I will remind reporters, please feel free to email Calley Hair, our Press Secretary with any additional questions you may have.

Thank you to everyone who took part on the panel. And you also have our contact information. And we are here to help. So please feel free to call or email us as well. And as a reminder, the hearing that we've been referencing is Thursday at 10 AM. And thank you all for joining us.

Sen. Cantwell: Thanks to the Washingtonians. Thank you guys so much for this because you really are putting a face to the challenges that we face on these policies. So thank you.