

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell

Aviation Consumer Protection Event

May 31, 2024

Sen. Cantwell Opening Remarks

[\[AUDIO\]](#) [\[VIDEO\]](#)

Sen. Cantwell: Well thank you Virginia, and I want to thank you and your husband for being here today, and to thank Kathryn Horvath for her advocacy all the time at PIRG, but certainly on consumer airline issues, and why we had to be here today.

As the Betheas just mentioned, in 2022 they went through a holiday nightmare that they didn't have to do. They wanted to come home for Christmas and bring their team back after a great adventure and competition. But yet they couldn't do that because they couldn't get the communication from an airline about what their options were after the storm.

We all know that that storm, Winter Storm Elliot triggered a meltdown of some of our aviation system. It caused flight delays and cancellations of more than 2 million travelers. I'll never forget the image of young people sleeping on the airport floors while they were trying to get home for Christmas.

So I made sure that the Betheas, and the situation that happened at Rainier Beach High School Basketball team, became the focus of national legislation and discussion about what to do to fix our situation with the airlines.

It seems like yesterday that this all happened, and that you were stranded in Las Vegas, but we know that there are other people like the Betheas who were affected by this tragedy, and that we needed to have clear consumer rights at our airlines and air transportation system.

So after hearing the Betheas story, as Virginia said, yes, we told Southwest we wanted to make sure that this team, these families, were made whole, and that they were reimbursed because of their flight being cancelled, and them being stranded.

The Betheas spent over \$10,000 of their own money on hotels and food and players, and eventually that 18-hour drive back from a charter bus that was made possible through donated funds. It took more than 5 days from their flight being cancelled to have the team back home, here at Rainier Beach. So experiences like this shouldn't happen.

I asked the Betheas, what could we do to improve this situation? They really wanted to make sure they could get someone on the phone. And that is really what we made happen, literally, in their case, with the airlines asking them to call them immediately and rectify this mistake.

But I also knew that Congress needed stronger protections for consumers. Consumers need clear communication, they need the options communicated after them so that they can make their best travel plans.

So for the first time, Congress is setting into law passenger refunds for even non-refundable tickets. You're now entitled to a hassle-free refund after a three-hour delay of a domestic flight, and a six-hour delay for international flights.

Putting this into law gives this refund right after a significant delay, and it creates a strong legal foundation for no matter who is in the White House in the future. That means it can't be taken away, it's in the law.

This is a big win for consumers, and it's a big win for families. This legislation includes a provision that says you can no longer charge families just to sit next to each other. And, if the consumer wants a credit instead of a refund, [they] can get that credit, and it must last for five years. So no shortchanging the consumer on when they have to use that right.

And for the first time, we are also requiring airlines to set reimbursement policies for those costs that were incurred, like hotels, ground transportation, meals, and significant delays caused by flights. The Betheas, understandably, had trouble figuring all of this out when Southwest cancelled their flights, but under the new law, passengers will know what they are entitled to when that flight is cancelled, they'll know they can get their money back, and they can make the best decisions on their budget and travel plans.

We also said we have to make sure these laws are enforced, so if an airline violates these consumer rights, we now have a new DOT office that is responsible for implementing these new consumer rights. It will be able to issue up to \$75,000 in fines per violation for airlines who violate this law. This is a tripling of existing fines, and I believe will be a strong deterrent for airlines to make sure they uphold their responsibilities here.

We now will also have a requirement that they have to communicate to the individuals during these crises on a 24/7 basis. No more leaving them stranded or waiting in long lines for days just to find out what is going on.

So the passage of this law, unfortunately, because of the situation, but fortunately for all consumers, thanks to the Betheas, we now have a strong consumer protection law on the books protecting consumers throughout the United States, and giving them their rights that they deserve to travel in an efficient and effective manner, and not to be held hostage or stranded to the whims of the airlines. And now, I thank you very much, and happy to answer any questions.

Other Participant Remarks

Kathryn Horvath, Campaign Associate, WASHPIRG (remarks as prepared): Good afternoon, I'm Kathryn Horvath, campaign associate with WASHPIRG. On behalf of PIRG, I want to express our thanks to Sen. Cantwell for her leadership to make sure that Congress included meaningful consumer protections in the FAA Reauthorization Bill passed two weeks ago.

Airline passenger rights have been among the most important issues for us at PIRG for the last several years, as consumer satisfaction with the airlines has plummeted. Almost all of the airlines failed their customers miserably when COVID hit in 2020 and the world came to a screeching halt. The airlines refused to refund billions of dollars to customers whose flights were canceled. Then, the airlines

accepted a \$50 billion taxpayer bailout to keep employees on payroll, yet instead offered attractive buyouts and retirement packages to reduce staffing. That led to horrible problems with cancellations, delays, and overbooked flights in 2021 and 2022.

As we've detailed in our analysis of Department of Transportation data, complaints against U.S. airlines hit an all-time high in 2022. Something has to change - and the FAA reauthorization bill will drive that change.

This fantastic legislation will guarantee no-hassle refunds to passengers who want them when their flights are canceled or significantly delayed. It will also:

- Prohibit airlines from charging extra fees for children to sit next to their parent or adult travel companion;
- Define a "significant delay" as three hours for a domestic flight;
- Require airlines to honor travel vouchers for at least five years;
- Require airlines to provide live customer service 24/7.
- Plus many more changes that will help those who fly and those who are counting on loved ones to travel from distant locations for special occasions.

There is still more work to be done, but this law goes a long way toward making air travel pleasant again. Again our thanks to Sen. Cantwell and others in Congress who pushed for these passenger protections.

Coach Mike Bethea: Hello, my name is Mike Bethea, I'm the head basketball coach over at Rainier Beach High School. This is my wife Virginia Bethea.

In December, Christmas, of 2022 we had taken our team down to Las Vegas, to play in a national tournament. Everything went good and as we were getting ready to come home, I get an alert on my phone. And they told us that the airline had shut everything down. So we went out to find out what was going on.

And the first thing they basically told us was -- we were on our own. Because of whatever had happened, the weather had shut down the airport here in Seattle.

So long story short, what happened was it was a daily trek for my wife and I back to the airport in the morning to find out if we could even just get on a standby list to fly home. A couple of times they told us they would put us all on a flight to Phoenix, but we would have just went to Phoenix and been in Phoenix. There was no connecting flight.

In the meantime, we had a party of 32 including the team. And, you have kids who were wanting to get home for Christmas. Parents who were wanting their kids home for Christmas. And so what we basically did was my wife and I, we made sure we focused on making the kids as comfortable as possible. The airline's approach was basically day after day: "You're on your own. Do what you have to do." Basically we were on our own.

My wife and I, we didn't want to put that burden on parents or kids. So we just made sure that the kids were comfortable and tried to provide them the best Christmas possible away from their family. Taking

the focus off of us being stranded and just focus on letting them know that everything was going to be okay.

And again, that was -- seven or eight days that we had to constantly go through that. I remember the first day when I called out to Southwest Airlines. They put me on hold. And I actually went to sleep. And I woke up and I was still on hold.

And that's when they told me to come out to the airport. And if you're familiar with the Las Vegas Airport, we were at Southwest at one end -- the line was all the way to the other end. And that was just to get in and talk to them about possibly getting your name on a list.

And so again, we went through six to seven days of going back and forth. Finally we reached out to a local businessman who's a close friend of mine. He told us: "You know what, let's just get these kids home. We'll worry about everything else later." And he chartered a bus and we were able to [in] 18 hours make it home to Seattle and get the kids home safely.

They missed Christmas, but we made the best of it. They had a good time experiencing Las Vegas and appreciating the situation we were in. Did I miss anything?

Mrs. Bethea: Okay we're going to fast forward this even more. So we met with Senator Maria Cantwell in regards to the situation. And she was very sensitive to the situation, because I'm sure she may have experienced this in her lifetime. So what we were excited about was that she was really adamant about providing assistance for not just us but for other folks like us who have been in similar situations.

So we talked about it, she was going to talk to the [COO] of Southwest Airlines. I jokingly said: "Why don't you just have him give us a call." Lo and behold, maybe two days later, we received a call from Mr. Watterson who is the [COO] for Southwest Airlines. And it was a shocker.

And so this woman right here, she's amazing. Amazing at just being gung ho about consumer rights and making sure that our kids and my husband and the rest of the team was made whole. So we appreciated that. So I want to introduce to you Senator Maria Cantwell.