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Submitted to

**SENATE COMMERCE COMMITTEE**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON AVIATION OPERATIONS, SAFETY, AND SECURITY**

**CONGESTION AND DELAYS: THE IMPACT ON TRAVELERS AND  
POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS**

**SEPTEMBER 27, 2007**

Chairman Rockefeller, Senator Lott, Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit a statement for the record regarding the important issue of Congestion and Delays: The Impact on Travelers and Possible Solutions.

With its mission to assist people who are in transition—or crisis—and disconnected from their support systems, **Travelers Aid** has provided “*A Helping Hand Along the Way*” to travelers for more than 155 years. In addition to inner-city locations that assist stranded persons, Travelers Aid has a network of programs at twenty-five North American airports. At those airport locations, Travelers Aid, using over sixteen hundred volunteers, assisted more than six and one-quarter million people last year with information, directions, and problem solving during the course of their travels. Travelers Aid is a leader in airport customer service, and the focus of this testimony relates to the traveling consumer and the changes they have endured in recent years.

We recall that today’s headlines regarding air traffic delays first surfaced in the summer of 2001, when the media was filled with stories of an air travel system straining with record numbers of travelers. The need to modernize the nation’s air traffic control system and increase runway capacity (requiring many years of planning) were cited as the long-term fix. Then came September 11, 2001, after which the nation’s airlines were no longer operating at record capacity. Airline survival became the story in the summer of 2002.

After airplanes were used to attack the World Trade Center, many people avoided air travel completely, and there was a steep decline for several years in foreign visitors to the United States. New security requirements at airports, including the guidance for passengers to arrive an hour and a half to two hours before flying (even longer for international travel) have prompted consumers to change their traveling habits as witnessed by the growing number of passengers on Amtrak's northeast corridor. Anecdotal evidence suggests that because of the requirement for earlier arrival at airports, many passengers have opted to drive instead of flying for trips that could be accomplished in four or five hours.

In an effort to remain profitable, airlines have reduced their personnel at airports. Automated check-in kiosks have permitted fewer customer service agents, and reductions in the number of baggage handlers has slowed the process of getting checked luggage to travelers at the end of their trip. (NOTE: When liquids were first banned on flights in August, 2006, this had an impact on the number of people who decided to check baggage rather than surrender liquid items during the TSA security screening.) Our experience during the last six years is that consumers are savvy, and it doesn't take long for them to adapt their behavior to new regulations and procedures.

In 2007, we are seeing record numbers of airline passengers, and the problems observed earlier are with us once again—only this time within an environment that has changed significantly over the past several years. In their groundbreaking book MEGATRENDS, authors Naisbett and Aburdene noted that in an increasingly technological world, hi-

touch would be the antidote to high tech. Travelers Aid's experience with travelers suggests that this is true. As the air travel experience becomes more complicated and more stressful (increased security, new regulations, fewer airline customer service personnel, growing delays, overbooked flights, and lost luggage), more and more travelers are turning to Travelers Aid. With air travel this year expected to top the 737 million passengers handled in 2006, on any given day an airport is like a small city; teeming with people who are traveling out of business necessity, enjoying a vacation, or traveling for a multitude of specific reasons (e.g., funerals, family illness, job searches). Like every city, the population includes those who are anxious or inexperienced about their travels; elderly or people with disabilities; people on medication; and those trying to cope with an unexpected change in their itinerary. Every day, Travelers Aid sees people with travel-related problems:

- Missed a connecting flight and have to reschedule
- Forgot medication or their medication remains in checked luggage
- Need extra assistance finding their way
- Arrive expecting to be picked up, but a flight delay creates a disconnect with their ride
- Need assistance in mailing back a precious item that TSA would ask them to surrender
- Those who arrive at the wrong airport (Yes, it happens! e.g., Dallas when they wanted to go to Dulles)

The Internet has transformed the way people plan their travels, and has also helped keep costs competitive while providing more consumer choices. Not that many years ago a person would normally contact an airline to arrange their trip from, for example, New York to Los Angeles. Now after researching a variety of options on the Internet, a person may reserve airline “A” from New York to Chicago, while scheduling airline “B” from Chicago to Los Angeles. If the first flight is delayed sufficient to cause the person to miss the connecting flight, then the traveler confronts additional challenges of re-booking fees, etc. from the second airline (which has no investment in the earlier leg of the passenger’s trip). This is another example of the type of traveler assisted by Travelers Aid.

Our volunteers are knowledgeable and experienced in common travel problems, and know how to assist frustrated and sometimes angry travelers. Through person-to-person interaction, Travelers Aid provides up-to-date information to help people make decisions, shares our expertise of how other travelers have handled similar situations, and acts as an ombudsman to assist the traveler with airline or airport personnel.

Travelers Aid—once a fixture at rail stations when trains were the most common source for interstate travel—has been a part of the country’s major airports for more than four decades (LAX, SFO, DCA, IAD, JFK, ORD, DTW). Travelers Aid is a critical customer component, and because of our use of volunteers, a cost-effective way to help travelers. With the post 9/11 security measures consuming much more of traveler’s time, many people now refer to the “hassle” of air travel. Add in the growing numbers of delays for flights and/or passenger luggage, and the stress levels are higher than ever at airports. We

at Travelers Aid are there to help reduce the stress of modern travel. In addition to services provided at each of the airports that Travelers Aid serves, we maintain an active network to keep those airport programs connected. Because a passenger's journey encompasses a minimum of two airports—and often a third with connecting flights—a Travelers Aid volunteer at Dallas/Fort Worth Airport, for example, can contact the Travelers Aid program at the destination airport to alert them regarding a passenger who (because of age, infirmity, or other factors) may require the services of Travelers Aid upon their arrival.

As a result of this networking capacity, we believe that we can do much more at airport locations that currently do not have a Travelers Aid presence. As a matter of public policy, airports should be encouraged to incorporate Travelers Aid programs that can assist air passengers by providing up-to-date information, directions, and problem-solving in order to make their journey go a little smoother. The result for the airport is a more pleasant and stress-reduced travel experience.

We are always happy to serve as a resource for the Subcommittee on Aviation Operations, Safety, and Security regarding issues affecting air passengers.

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Travelers Aid, founded in 1851, is the oldest continuing non-sectarian social services movement in the United States. Travelers Aid International is a nonprofit association whose membership served more than 6.5 million people last year in forty-eight

communities, and at thirty-six transportation centers. Travelers Aid is most visible in transportation centers—the nation’s busiest airports, as well as bus and train stations—where each year millions of people seek information or assistance. Travelers Aid volunteers provide reassurance as well as the information necessary for travelers to make informed decisions. Travelers Aid assists elderly and disabled persons, and anyone who needs extra attention to make their connections. Our services at airports have been particularly beneficial to travelers during the peak demand of the summer of 2007.

Web site: <http://www.travelersaid.org>