SENATOR RICHARD BLUMENTHAL | NOVEMBER 20, 2026

CHAOS IN THE CLOUDS:

The Trump Administration's Aviation Policies Are Costing Consumers Money and Time



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Executive Summary:

For most consumers, flying can be both expensive and stressful. Additional fees and constantly changing prices make it extremely difficult for consumers to know if they are getting the best deal. Arriving at the airport, too many consumers encounter delays and even cancelled flights without warning, leading to missed business meetings, shortened vacations, and additional costs for new flights and hotel rooms.

Before President Trump took office, the aviation industry was already struggling to satisfy the needs of American air travelers. In 2024, nearly one in four U.S. passengers experienced a flight delay or cancellation. In 2025, this trend continued and worsened. According to a survey of travelers who experienced significant disruptions in 2025, 42 percent incurred an out-of-pocket expense that was not reimbursed, 62 percent said they lost meaningful time, and 50 percent experienced additional stress or anxiety. Now, in 2026, passengers are continuing to face historic levels of delays and cancellations, especially in the aftermath of the November 13 FAA ground stop.

Despite the unprecedented need for more protections from delays and deceptive pricing, the Trump Administration's Department of Transportation (DOT) has made airlines less accountable for consumer harm by stripping away enforcement mechanisms. Across the aviation industry, the administration has taken actions that make air travel more expensive, deceptive, and downright frustrating for travelers.

Many of these actions have happened quietly, through procedural rulemaking that the average American air traveler may not be aware of. Senator Blumenthal's report sheds light on these actions that have and will fundamentally reshape the air passenger experience, explicitly to their detriment.

Actions by the Trump Administration:

I. Upending Years of Precedent in Air Fare Transparency

- **Allowing Airlines to Mislead Consumers**

  What Trump Did: In July 2026, President Trump began the process of removing a critical requirement that airlines must advertise the full price of a plane ticket prominently, rather than only advertising the base fare, which can deceive consumers.

  Impact on Americans: Allowing airlines to advertise only the base fare excludes nearly 20 percent of the total cost of the ticket, tricking consumers. This rule will also cause consumers to spend more time trying to understand the true cost of a ticket. In fact, the average consumer already spends over five hours searching for airline tickets prior to booking. President Trump's action will only lead to more consumer confusion and time wasted.

  Passenger Reactions:

  Public comments submitted in response to DOT's proposal to rescind the Full Fare Rule:

  "Frankly, it really shouldn't be controversial that a business is expected to show the total cost of the service that they're selling… the only reason the government would consider allowing them to do that is if the mission of the Dept. of Transportation is now to maximize airline company profits rather than protect and serve airline travelers."

  "Repealing the Full Fare Rule will break flight shopping and make it virtually impossible to comparison shop, a vital aspect of flight shopping."

  "The proposed changes will make things more confusing for the consumers."

- **Encouraging Airlines to Hide Fees**

  What Trump Did: In July 2026, President Trump abandoned a Biden-era rule that would have required airlines and other ticket agents to clearly disclose fees for additional services, like checked bag fees, change fees, and cancellation fees, that are not part of the base fare.

  Impact on Americans: The 2024 rule was essential in ensuring that consumers have all the information needed to understand the true cost of air transportation and easily compare offerings by different airlines. Now, these fees can be hidden, leaving consumers in the dark. Airline ticket prices are already significantly outpacing the overall rate of inflation, skyrocketing by an average of over 22 percent in 2026. Allowing airlines to hide ancillary fees will only obscure this rapid increase in air fares.

Airlines like Delta, American, and United are taking advantage of this rollback and the lack of disclosure requirements by raising checked bag fees. In 2025, airlines made a record $157 billion in ancillary fees globally – dramatically higher than the $67.4 billion generated by ancillary fees in 2016.

Passenger Reactions:

Public comments in support of the Biden Administration's 2024 rule, which the Trump Administration abandoned:

"I am in favor of this proposed rule because companies purposely avoid telling customers about the "hidden" fees because they know they will lose business if they were upfront and honest."

"I support disclosure of fees upfront from airlines. As a consumer now, it is difficult to discern the true cost of a flight as well as what is included within a given fare."

"I agree with this proposed rule because I believe it is dishonest for companies to have hidden fees."

II. Eliminating Avenues for Consumers to be Compensated

- **Withdrawing Key Airline Passenger Rights**

What Trump Did: President Trump withdrew a Biden-era rulemaking that would have required airlines to provide between $200 and $775 in cash compensation to passengers when the airline causes a lengthy delay or cancellation. The proposed rule would have also required airlines to provide displaced passengers with free rebooking, meals, and lodging for overnight delays.

Impact on Americans: Without these core protections and passenger compensation, millions of Americans will lose money and time. In 2025, nearly one in four passengers faced significant delays or cancellations, costing consumers additional unplanned expenses for another hotel room night or meals. These delays have real costs: in 2025, flight disruptions cost passengers over $484 per person on average. Now, due to this rollback, these passengers will receive no compensation, and airlines will not be deterred or face consequences for their delays.

Passenger Reactions:

Public comments submitted in support of the Biden-era rule the Trump Administration withdrew:

"It is only fair that air travelers are compensated for delays in flights that incur expenses for the traveler which could have been prevented by the airline."

"As a 65-year-old person, who has been flying since the day I was born, the proposal for "Airline Responsibility" is long over-due… The delay in arrival/take-off may not be the airlines fault completely, but after decades of abusing the paying public, this practice needs to end.

"Holding the Air Carriers…accountable for their abusive behavior is a step in the right direction. Money talks. B.S. walks."

- Reducing Consumer Choice in Refund Compensation

  What Trump Did: President Trump is reducing passenger choice in compensation when they are involuntarily denied boarding. The Administration is actively trying to limit passengers being compensated through direct check or cash payments, instead giving airlines the ability to provide prepaid or stored-value cards without input from the consumer.

  Impact on Americans: The average price of domestic airfare in 2026 was nearly $430. Americans have less than $500 in discretionary income each month. This means the difference between a full refund and having to book a new flight can be the difference between financial solvency and insolvency.

Passenger Reactions:

Public comments submitted in support of the Biden-era rule the Trump Administration is undermining:

"It's high time something be done to help the customers who are at the mercy of the airlines."

"Passengers should be compensated for their time and inconvenience when the flight delays/cancellations are within the scope of responsibility of the airline."

"Airlines are boosting profits without being held responsible for "bad actions"."

III. Eroding the Air Traveler Experience

- Reducing Air Passenger Representation

What Trump Did: In April 2026, the Trump Administration empowered airlines and other corporate entities to significantly delay DOT's rulemaking process when it establishes or changes consumer air traveler protections under its authority to prohibit unfair and deceptive practices. This unnecessarily puts a thumb on the scale in favor of airlines and other corporate interests.

Impact on Americans: In recent years, consumer complaints lodged against airlines have rapidly increased, hitting a record high of nearly 67,000 in 2024 – compared to just under 10,000 in 2019. Many of those complaints are directly related to alleged unfair and deceptive practices that DOT is empowered to prohibit and penalize. Now is not the time to give outsized control over DOT's imposition of consumer protections for passengers to the airlines.

Passenger Impact:

Allowing large airlines an outsized influence in DOT's investigation and hearing process will only create additional barriers for consumers seeking justice.

- **Ending Enforcement of Protections for Passengers with Disabilities**

What Trump Did: In September 2025, the Trump Administration announced that it would stop enforcing a Biden-era rule that provided key protections for air travelers who use a wheelchair. The rule established standards for airline liability for damage to wheelchairs, training requirements, pre-departure notifications, and fare difference reimbursements, among others.

Impact on Americans: Americans with disabilities have long faced significant barriers to air travel. Previous surveys of passengers with disabilities have found that as many as 70 percent report damage to their mobility device while traveling and 67 percent must wait for their requested accommodation upon arrival. There is also widespread reporting of personnel not being properly trained. Ceasing enforcement of this key rule will only create new barriers for Americans with disabilities.

Passenger Reactions:

More than 11,000 wheelchairs were damaged by U.S. airlines in 2024, and incidents like these continue to happen:

Public comments submitted in support of the Biden-era rule the Trump Administration withdrew:

"I have firsthand experienced damage to my mobility aid due to airline mishandling… am dreading needing important health appointments out of state and risking not having a functional mobility aid to get there if the airline destroys it."

"I won't fly anywhere because I am certain that my power wheelchair will get damaged…This means that I cannot travel from Florida to Connecticut to visit our family, which I have not done for almost a decade. Driving there is beyond my capabilities. This is so heartbreaking."

"I enthusiastically support the Department of Transportation's (USDOT) Proposed Rule to ensure safe and respectful air travel accommodations for passengers who use wheelchairs."

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations:

The Trump Administration's aviation agenda has clearly taken a side – that of large airlines and other corporate stakeholders. This comes at the direct expense of American air travelers, who will now face increased costs, confusion, and frustration. American travelers are already dealing with the highest number of delays and cancellations in over a decade, and they will now have to face new barriers to receive compensation, encounter uncertainty when it comes to the true, total cost of air travel, and risk having their interests and protections eroded. The result is an aviation system that increasingly disregards the needs of passengers, while prioritizing the bottom line of corporations.

In response to this unprecedented rollback of aviation-related consumer protections, Congress should pass Senator Blumenthal's *Airline Passengers' Bill of Rights (APBOR),* which would:

I. Reduce Consumer Costs; Increase Transparency

APBOR would reduce consumer costs while increasing fee transparency by:

- Establishing minimum compensation standards for overbooked, delayed, or cancelled flights;
- Requiring airlines to compensate passengers for at least $1,350 if they are involuntarily denied boarding because of an oversold flight or face a delay or cancellation of more than 4 hours;
- Requiring automatic refunds in the event of lost, damaged, delayed, or pilfered baggage;
- Creating robust consumer protections against unreasonable fees, including for ancillary services, such as seat selection or checking baggage;
- Ensuring airlines proactively notify passengers of their rights and eligibility for refunds, compensation, and protections;
- Prohibiting airlines from limiting consumers' access to information relating to flight details, including the cost of fares, fees, and taxes;
- Providing increased transparency in the pricing of tickets from air carriers, ticket agents, and other online travel agents; and,
- Preventing airlines from making material changes to frequent flyer programs without providing reasonable notice to consumers.

II. Ensure Fair Treatment of Consumers

APBOR would help safeguard core consumer rights and enhance the flying experience by:

- Requiring that all passengers have access to the essentials, such as safe drinking water and accessible lavatories, during their flight;
- Increasing transparency of airlines' policies relating to family seating and interline agreements;
- Enhancing requirements relating to passenger space and seat size on aircraft;

- Establishing requirements for at least biannual training for any air carrier employees or representatives who interact with passengers; and,
- Improving the consumer complaint process at the Department of Transportation.

III. Enhance Airline Accountability & Promote Competition

APBOR would better hold airlines accountable through increased enforcement authority and competition by:

- Increasing the maximum civil penalty for violations of passenger protection laws;
- Prohibiting airlines from negotiating with the Federal Aviation Administration to reduce civil penalties;
- Limiting the application of anti-consumer pre-dispute arbitration and class-action waiver clauses;
- Creating private rights of action for unfair and deceptive practices as well as discrimination claims; and,
- Requiring the government to study the state of competition in the air transportation industry and its impact on fairs, fees, routes, performance, and investment in aircraft, amenities, and workforce.