

Bay Area Airports Alert

Improving Safety, Security and Service Standards at Airports Across the Bay Area

Consumer, Disability Rights Advocates Join Assemblymember Ted Lieu in Announcing Airline Passenger Health and Safety Act

LOS ANGELES – On Friday, February 22, State Assemblymember Ted Lieu announced the Airline Passenger Health and Safety Act (AB 1407), which would ensure that airlines adequately provide for the needs of passengers when they are onboard a delayed flight, either at takeoff or landing.

In addition, the bill would require airlines to post on their website information about chronically delayed flights and runway incursions, and to compensate passengers 150% of the ticket price if they missed a connection because of a previous delay. AB 1407 would also create an Office of the Airline Advocate, which could investigate and resolve consumer complaints against the airlines.

Assemblymember Lieu introduced the bill following a recent series of flight delays that kept passengers like Kate Hanni, founder of the Coalition for an Airline Passengers' Bill of Rights, waiting for hours on the tarmac, in some cases with no food or water, poor ventilation, and overflowing toilets. A similar bill was passed in New York, while other states have introduced similar legislation.

"The health and safety of my constituents who fly is very important to me," said Assembly Lieu. "AB 1407 will give California airline passengers the strongest consumer protections in the nation."

Coming together to support Assemblymember Lieu's bill were consumer and disability rights advocates, including Ms. Hanni; Richard Holober, Executive Director, Consumer Federation of California; and Fidel Valenzuela, Westside Center for Independent Living.

"People with disabilities make up a significant part of the traveling public, and we have a great interest in advocating for airlines to take into account the specific needs of travelers with disabilities," said Mr. Valenzuela. "I applaud this effort to require airlines to be more accountable to their customers."

Workers who provide services to passengers were also in support of this bill.

"We work hard to make sure that passengers get quality service," said Jose Hernandez, a wheelchair attendant at LAX for over 6 years and a representative from the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Airport Workers United. "This bill is a great opportunity for passengers, workers, and decision-makers to come together to ensure that the airlines step up and treat us all with dignity and respect."



From left to right: Richard Holober; Mike Garcia, President, SEIU; Assemblymember Ted Lieu; Fidel Valenzuela; Kate Hanni; and Jose Hernandez.

Recent Trends: Airline Consolidation

Discussions of airline consolidation have occupied industry news in recent months as we await the seemingly inevitable announcement of a merger between Northwest Airlines and Delta Air Lines.

Talks between the two airlines appear to be delayed due to the challenges of bringing the two workforces together, calling attention to the impact that mergers have on the workers that keep these airlines flying.

Airline executives view mergers as a way to expand their operations while cutting costs. While this will benefit those at the top, it will be at the expense of their workers who faithfully served the airlines despite hard financial times in the post-9/11 world, of the passengers who will have fewer competitive airlines to choose from, and, finally, of the communities in which the airlines operate.

All three major Bay Area airports – SFO, OAK, and SJC – together generate close to 100,000 jobs. Many of those workers, similar to workers at airports nation-wide, are subcontracted by airlines to provide services. Concerns over layoffs and the consequent impacts on local communities have brought elected leaders, such as Minnesota Congressman James Oberstar, to publicly renounce any airline merger deals.

Workers who provide services to the airlines, either directly employed or subcontracted, play an essential role in an airline's successful operation. Any merger or alternatives to improve the industry must also raise standards for those workers and ensure quality compensation and job stability.