

Sen. Duckworth Calls Out Southwest Airlines In First Hearing As Aviation Chair

by Rachel Huxley-Cohen
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WASHINGTON, D.C. — U.S. Senator Tammy Duckworth (D-IL), member of the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation (CST), participated in her first CST hearing as Chair of the Subcommittee on Aviation Safety, Operations, and Innovation today and questioned Southwest Airlines and other industry executives on the failures of the airline during the 2022 holiday travel season. She called out Andrew

Watterson, Chief Operating Officer of Southwest Airlines, for the company's lack of transparency, the unacceptable wait times that customers were forced to experience and its refusal to heed warnings that could have helped prevent this meltdown before it ever happened. You can find Duckworth's opening remarks [here](#) and her witness question line [here](#).

In her opening remarks as Chair of the Aviation Subcommittee, Duckworth said: "We must crack down on carriers that have gotten away with predatory practices that treat customers like suckers and view passengers with disabilities as disposable. In recent years, has suffered from complacency and a desperate drive for profits that has placed the needs of Wall Street above all else."

Additionally, Duckworth criticized the airline's lack of accessibility for people with disabilities and secured commitment from Airlines for America that it will support her effort to require the Department of Transportation to audit air carrier website accessibility.

When questioning Watterson, Duckworth said: "The thing I find so shocking is that while all these delays and cancellations were happening, and passengers were calling Southwest for help, it took hours to reach a live person—if they could reach a live person at all. For someone with a disability, such as a visual impairment, the inability to reach someone by phone at Southwest is especially frustrating. And not all websites and mobile apps are easily accessible for persons with disabilities, despite existing guidelines and industry best practices."

As a pilot, Senator Duckworth is well-qualified to serve as Chair of the Subcommittee on Aviation Safety, Operations, and Innovation, especially as Congress is set to begin crafting a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) Reauthorization bill this year. Duckworth's priorities for the legislation are to strengthen safety, bolster the aviation workforce, hold FAA accountable for finally modernizing air traffic control technology, and restore trust and confidence in the civil aviation system.

At the end of last year, Duckworth introduced the [Emergency Vacating of Aircraft Cabin \(EVAC\) Act](#) to ensure the FAA does more to prioritize passenger safety by appropriately considering seat size, carry-on baggage, people with disabilities, seniors, and children in its emergency evacuation standards. She also led the introduction of the bipartisan [Aviation Workforce Development Enhancement Act](#) to help meet future needs in our aviation workforce in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. To help break down the significant barriers that Americans with disabilities continue to face when accessing websites and software applications, Duckworth introduced the [Websites and Software Applications Accessibility Act](#) to build on the promise of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) by requiring that entities currently covered by the ADA, as well

as commercial providers, maintain websites and software applications that are accessible for Americans with disabilities.