

US is investigating Delta's flight cancellations and faltering response to global tech outage

July 23 2024, by DAVID KOENIG and MATT OTT



Travelers stand in line at a Delta Air Lines counter at Reagan National Airport on Friday, July 19, 2024, in Arlington, Va. A global technology outage caused by a faulty software update grounded flights, knocked banks and media outlets offline, and disrupted hospitals, small businesses and other services on Friday, highlighting the fragility of a digitized world dependent on just a handful of providers. Credit: AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein

U.S. regulators are investigating how Delta Air Lines is treating passengers affected by canceled and delayed flights as the airline struggles to recover from a global technology outage.

Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg announced the Delta investigation on the X social media platform Tuesday "to ensure the airline is following the law and taking care of its passengers during continued widespread disruptions."

"All airline passengers have the right to be treated fairly, and I will make sure that right is upheld," Buttigieg said.

Delta and its Delta Connection partners canceled about 500 flights on Tuesday by midday on the East Coast, accounting for about two-thirds of all cancellations in the United States, according to tracking platform FlightAware.

[The outage began](#) Thursday night into Friday morning, after a faulty software upgrade from [cybersecurity company CrowdStrike](#) to more than 8 million Microsoft computers around the world.

The Atlanta-based carrier has canceled more than 6,600 flights since the outage started, far more than any other airline, according to figures from FlightAware and travel-data provider Cirium.

Delta said it was cooperating with the investigation.

"We remain entirely focused on restoring our operation after cybersecurity vendor CrowdStrike's faulty Windows update rendered IT systems across the globe inoperable," an airline spokesperson said in a statement. "Across our operation, Delta teams are working tirelessly to

care for and make it right for customers impacted by delays and cancellations as we work to restore the reliable, on-time service they have come to expect from Delta."

Delta has said upward of half its technology systems run on Microsoft Windows, including a tool the airline uses to schedule pilots and flight attendants. The systems could not keep up with the high number of changes triggered by the outage.



A Delta Air Lines jet leaves the gate, Friday, July 19, 2024, at Logan International Airport in Boston. Credit: AP Photo/Michael Dwyer

The collapse at Delta is stunning for an outfit that was widely viewed as

the best big U.S. airline—the most profitable before and after the pandemic, and the best-run operation. Delta has almost always ranked near the top among all U.S. carriers for on-time performance.

The Transportation Department said it launched the investigation after seeing Delta's continued widespread flight disruptions "and reports of concerning customer service failures."

The department said the investigation will evolve as it "processes the high volume of consumer complaints we have already received against Delta."

Investigators are likely to focus on whether Delta is complying with federal rules and offering prompt refunds to passengers whose flights are canceled or significantly delayed. In a text provided to The Associated Press, a Delta passenger whose flight was canceled Saturday was told, "If you prefer not to rebook your trip, your ticket value will automatically be available as an eCredit that can be used towards a future Delta ticket."

In Washington, lawmakers are beginning to weigh in. Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., chair of the Senate committee that oversees airlines, said in a letter to Delta CEO Ed Bastian that she is "concerned" that Delta is not complying with passenger rights contained in a law that Congress passed in May.

"While the technology outage was clearly not caused by Delta or any airline, I am nevertheless concerned that Delta is failing to meet the moment and adequately protect the needs of passengers," Cantwell wrote.

Delta's meltdown mirrors that of Southwest Airlines, which canceled nearly 17,000 flights over 15 days in December 2022. A Transportation Department investigation ended with Southwest agreeing to pay a \$35

million fine as part of a \$140 million settlement.

Southwest blamed its breakdown on a winter storm, but other airlines recovered in a couple days while Southwest did not. Consumer advocates see the same pattern with Delta this month—the airline continues to blame the CrowdStrike outage while rivals such as American recovered quickly. Even United Airlines, the second-worst at cancellations, was back on track Monday.

"It's not about the thing that caused the problem, it's about how you recover from the problem. That's the test of an airline," said William McGee, a former aircraft dispatcher who is a consumer advocate at the American Economic Liberties Project, a group critical of large corporations.

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