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LOCAL

JetBlue CEO blames Logan delays on staff shortages, plans to reduce service through summer



FILE – A traveler wearing a protective mask, due to the coronavirus outbreak, walks through the nearly empty JetBlue terminal at Logan Airport in Boston, Friday, May 29, 2020.

Charles Krupa / AP

By **Marilyn Schairer**

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Passengers who plan to fly JetBlue Airlines from Boston's Logan International Airport for spring break, Passover, Easter, Ramadan or Patriot's Day will need to bring more than their patience with them to the airport this weekend and possibly even longer.

The number of airline passengers is nearing pre-pandemic levels as warmer weather and spring holidays arrive – and JetBlue has not been able to meet that demand. In the last two weekends, JetBlue has delayed or canceled more than 200 flights at Logan Airport. Airline officials cite a cascade of problems for recent disruptions in service, from severe weather and traffic control delays to staff shortages. A flight crew union, though, said the airline has not been doing enough to retain workers.

“Despite hiring more than 2,500 crewmembers already this year, like many businesses we remain short-staffed, and the current disruptions exacerbate an already challenging staffing situation,” said JetBlue President and CEO Joanna Geraghty in a statement.

The airline apologized to customers and said they are looking to minimize impact to passengers by issuing cancellations earlier, especially on severe weather days. To further help avoid disruptions, the airline will institute a schedule reduction through April and into the summer months. They’ve already scheduled a planned capacity reduction of 8-10% in May. But, according to Geraghty, JetBlue is unable to reduce capacity at three major airports – Washington’s Reagan, New York’s John F. Kennedy and LaGuardia – due to contractual obligations.

John Samuelson, international president of the Transport Workers Union, said the main problem is staff shortages. He accused JetBlue of mismanaging its labor force.

“The biggest problem that they have is a self-inflicted wound on insufficient head count – and that’s across the board, but in particular, we represent the flight attendants, and they are short at least 600 flight attendants,” said Samuelson, whose union represents about 150,000 airline workers in the United States.

He said about 20 JetBlue flight attendants are leaving their jobs each week because of mental fatigue, physical exhaustion and stress. That has led to a high level of attrition, he said, because the airline cannot hire fast enough to fill the gap. Samuelson said getting new staff up to speed takes a minimum of one month.

“The more staffing shortages there are, the more planes are delayed, the more frustration there is among our flight attendant crews,” he said.

The latest data from Transportation Safety Administration shows the number of airline passengers at airport checkpoints is close to pre-pandemic travel levels gathered in 2019, before a steep drop off during the pandemic. TSA figures show the week of April 10, 2022, there were 2,293,548 passengers moving through airports compared to 2,446,801 for the same week in 2019.

And as the number of air travelers increases, so too has the popularity of travel insurance. Sudden cancellations or delays can leave passengers with added hotel costs and rebooking fees, which, in most cases, airlines no longer reimburse.

Narendra Khatri, the CEO of international travelers' insurance company INSUBUY, said business is up 60% since the pandemic began. One popular insurance option is called "cancel for any reason," which will reimburse a traveler if they decide they don't want to take a scheduled trip, no matter their reason.

"It is protection for the unknown. For many things that may happen," Khatri said.

Anne Lischwe, travel sales manager of AAA Northeast, said that while airlines such as JetBlue struggle to keep up with the demand, passengers will need to adjust. She said people should prepare for the worst and be flexible.

"If there is a change – a last-minute change or cancellation to a flight schedule or something like that – you want to be the first to know," she said, "so make sure you're signed up for text alerts and email alerts from the airline."



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