Testimony of James M. Crites

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Written Remarks of James M. Crites

Chairman Costello, Ranking Member Petri, and members of the Committee, good afternoon, and thank you for inviting me to participate in this important hearing. I am Jim Crites, Executive Vice President of Operations for the Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport.

I also serve as the Aviation Group Chair for the Transportation Research Board, part of the National Academy of Sciences.

I am here today to provide testimony regarding airport contingency planning. I'd like to begin by saying that safe flight is accomplished through close industry-wide partnership, whereby effective planning, execution and after-action refinement of best practices are accomplished through continuous communication, collaboration and coordination across all service providers. Contingency planning is no different. In fact, given the increased demand for a rapid effective response, there is an even greater need and sense of urgency behind these close knit partnerships well beyond normal operations.

Whether an emergency is caused by significant adverse weather, or concern regarding a highly contagious disease, it is recognized that all essential service providers actively partner to address flight operations and passengers' needs. In reality, it has largely been left to the airlines and Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to address all of the issues that must be addressed, but in fact we have learned that there are critical services that can only be provided by the other aviation stakeholders such as airports, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), Customs and Border Protection (CBP), concessionaires and local commercial ground transportation service providers (see Slide #2 of attached presentation).

The good news is that the entire industry has reached agreement regarding this as demonstrated by the development of the Contingency Planning Guidelines Document by the Department of Transportation (DOT) National Task Force To Develop Model Contingency Plans To Deal With Lengthy Airline On-Board Ground Delays (Task Force).

The plan calls for all stakeholders to share their existing operational and contingency plans with one another, to identify the gaps in providing needed services, to refine and integrate their existing operational and contingency plans to address these gaps, to formulate the means for providing shared situational awareness so as to ensure that all parties are aware of what is occurring and to enable mutual support to address needs, and finally to share the lessons learned at the conclusion of an incident so as to ensure ongoing response plan effectiveness and continuous improvement (see Slide #3 of attached presentation).

Specifically, it calls for airports and their associated concessionaires and ground transportation service providers to stay open for business, for TSA and CBP to have staff available to process passengers as the situation warrants, and for shared communication between the airlines and airports to provide for the ground handling and deplaning of passengers so as to avoid the types of unacceptable situations that are experienced by passengers stranded on aircraft due to weather or system disruptions (see Slide #4 and #5 of attached presentation).

Diverted flights are specifically called out for special attention in this plan. What it recommends is a refinement to the existing FAA and airline decision-making model when having to divert a flight to an alternate airport. Avoiding the diversion of an international arriving flight to an airport lacking CBP resources is advised (see Slide #6 of attached presentation). As previously mentioned for impacted airports, it identifies the need for the selected diversion airport team to be available and open for business to properly receive and process these flights. This includes, as was mentioned earlier, the ability to gate or properly ground handle the aircraft, to deplane passengers, and to provide concessions support and TSA passenger screening as may be required.

Under the leadership and at the request of this Subcommittee, DOT earlier this year issued a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) for enhancing passenger protections by requiring airline contingency plans. While a final rule has not yet been issued, we

believe that it is important that airline plans include a requirement to coordinate their plans with all airports at which they provide scheduled or charter service. Only through such coordination and partnership can plans be developed that address the issues that arise during irregular operations and tarmac delays.

I'd now like to talk to the value of this partnership as it relates to emergency response to contagious disease outbreaks or pandemics.

First, I would like to point out that extensive partnering has been developed and effectively deployed at the local airport level to address diseases such as SARS, Bird Flu Influenza, Ebola and the like. Additional partners are brought to the table including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), World Health Organization, National Institutes of Health and local public health officials to provide effective, real-time, and tailored response guidance (see Slide #7 of attached presentation). These partners, in concert with the aviation associations, FAA, airlines and airports currently address a wide variety of medical concerns, including yearly flu season disease outbreaks. Unfortunately we had an opportunity to test the system on April 28 at Baltimore Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport (BWI) when an AirTran Airways flight arriving from Cancun, Mexico had two individuals on board exhibiting flu-like symptoms. AirTran contacted BWI officials who activated their emergency plan, which for this type of incident included contacting the CDC quarantine station in Washington, DC. While the two individuals were found not to have the H1N1 flu, it showed the system worked.

Can we do better, absolutely! While public health issues vary greatly, a process for aligning stakeholders at a level similar to that developed in the Contingency Planning Guidelines Document does not yet exist. I know that DOT is working with Airports Council International-North America (ACI-NA), the Air Transport Association (ATA) and the International Air Transport Association (IATA), as well as CDC and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) on such a process. It will be important that the plan which results from this work provide a flexible yet standard approach to enable value-added

refinement to how our nation and aviation system respond to a future pandemic incident.

In summary, the process identified during the DOT Task Force for planning, execution and after-action refinement of contingency plans works. The challenge is to ensure continuous communication, collaboration and coordination across all service providers to address not only irregular operations but the wide variety of critical situations that airports experience (see Slide #8 of attached presentation).

I have one final thought regarding irregular operations, and that is to note that with rising load factors on aircraft comes a greater need to provide sufficient capacity to accommodate flight operations. In years past with lower load factors, airlines were capable of supplying enough seats so that the vast majority of passengers who might have encountered extended delays due to adverse weather conditions or other causes could complete their intended travel on the day of travel. However, as the challenges of maintaining what I would refer to as Ramp Capacity increase during periods of lightning or freezing precipitation, so does the rise in the number of passengers who find their duration of travel extended because record high load factors mean that fewer seats are available following a major delay. This too is a cause of serious concern to our passengers, and can serve as a driving force behind the airlines' desire to complete as many flight operations as possible during periods of adverse weather which in turn can lead to extended tarmac delay. As such, I would urge that we as an Aviation Industry strive to explore potential remedies to this situation as well.

In closing, I want to thank you for your support of the funding necessary for airports to be able to finance safety and capacity infrastructure. Your support of an increase in the Passenger Facility Charge (PFC) user fee as well as an increase in Airport Improvement Program (AIP) funding is greatly appreciated. Also, as Chairman of the Aviation Group for the Transportation Research Board, I want to express my sincere appreciation to this Subcommittee which helped to create and fund the highly effective Airport Cooperative Research Program. We are currently entering our fourth year of

research aimed at finding practical, near-term solutions to the aviation safety, security and environmental challenges facing airports today.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to participate in this hearing. I look forward to responding to your questions.