

Stranded fliers want more from airline



Link Christin, one of the passengers stranded overnight on a Continental flight in Rochester Minn., calls the airline's offer of compensation "an insult."

Offer 'inadequate' for night stuck on tarmac

By Gary Stoller, USA TODAY

An attempt by Continental Airlines to compensate passengers stuck overnight inside a regional jet on the tarmac of the Rochester, Minn., airport two weeks ago has angered some of them, who say they deserve more.

"For what we went through, Continental's attempt at compensation is wholly inadequate," says Link Christin, who says he felt "imprisoned" for 5½ hours waiting for Continental Express Flight 2816 to take off.

Christin, 48 other passengers and two young children held in laps were on the flight that left Houston Aug. 7 bound for Minneapolis-St. Paul before a thunderstorm diverted the plane to Rochester.

The passengers spent an uncomfortable night in the 50-seat jet with babies crying and a foul odor emanating from the toilet. They were allowed off the plane in the morning and later got back on for a short flight to Minneapolis-St. Paul.

WHAT CAN PASSENGERS DO? Stranded fliers have to be careful

The Department of Transportation is investigating the incident, and Continental and ExpressJet Airlines— which operated the flight for Continental — have publicly apologized to the passengers.

Continental also has sent them a compensation package that includes a letter of apology, a promise to refund the cost of their tickets, a \$200 voucher for a future flight and a \$50 gift card.

"I thought they could have done more," says Scott Johnson, a Minnesota state employee who was returning home from a business trip in Texas. "A \$200 flight credit won't buy a round-trip flight."

Christin, a professor at William Mitchell College of Law in St. Paul, says he's annoyed because the \$200 voucher expires in a year and includes a "release of liability." The voucher reads that by accepting it, "you release Continental, the operating carrier and their respective employees, agents and representatives from any and all liability, claims or damages resulting or arising from the matters related to your flight, compensation therefore or any related complaint."

'A shut-up package'

Continental's package seems more suited for a passenger bumped from a flight and booked on a subsequent flight, Christin says.

"What they sent is an insult," he says.

Fellow passenger Bill Johnson of Minneapolis says he also was insulted by the compensation and views it as "a shut-up package."

Johnson and his wife, Alysha, an air traffic controller at Rochester's airport, were returning from their honeymoon in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, when they got stuck in the long tarmac delay.

"It was infuriating, and I've never been so upset," says Johnson, a technician for an engineering company.

"I've been stuck in Denver airport for two days, but I could walk around and get food," he says. "I wasn't locked in a flying coffin."

Another passenger, Jodene Anderson, says Continental's compensation attempt "was outrageous," because it was not commensurate with the ordeal.

"What were those people thinking when they sent such compensation?" says Anderson, a psychotherapist who lives in Lakeville, Minn., and Cuautitlán Izcalli, Mexico. "Do they think we're stupid?"

Anderson says she left her home in Annandale, Minn., before she was trapped in Rochester. She wasn't able to sleep during the delay and wearily attended the reunion on the same day she arrived in Minneapolis-St. Paul.

Janet Tillmans, a passenger from Spring, Texas, says Continental should have offered a free round-trip future flight — not a \$200 credit — and the voucher should have no expiration date.

"I'm not in any hurry to jump on a Continental flight, especially this year," Tillmans says.

"It will take awhile to get over the aggravation my family went through."

'Hopefully, everybody has learned'

Continental spokeswoman Julie King declined to comment on complaints about the airline's compensation.

King says Continental has "processes in place to elevate decision-making" on customer care during long tarmac delays, "but those processes, unfortunately, failed in this case."

Customer-service guru John Tschohl says the compensation offered was "a slap in the face — too little and too late." Tschohl is president of the Service Quality Institute, a consulting company that provides customer-service training for companies.

Tschohl says Continental and ExpressJet should have immediately admitted they made a mistake not letting passengers off the plane during the long tarmac delay, refunded the ticket price and offered each passenger a \$1,000 flight credit with no expiration date.

Tillmans says she "felt like a hostage," and the smell on the small plane from the overloaded toilet "was disgusting."

She says she and her husband, Jim, were very uncomfortable with their 22-month-old daughter, Anna, alternately crying and sleeping across their laps.

Christin, the first passenger to complain publicly about the delay, says he was sitting in the rear of the jet and wasn't aware of any passenger requesting to get off the plane in Rochester.

Scott Johnson and Tillmans, however, say some passengers asked to get off and were denied.

"People kept asking politely to get off," says Johnson of Brooklyn Center, Minn.

Johnson says it was his first flight on Houston-based ExpressJet, and he "will definitely avoid" flying on the airline in the future.

ExpressJet spokeswoman Kristy Nicholas says the airline's service was "unacceptable," and it apologizes.

"We're trying to make sure this never happens again," Nicholas says.

"Hopefully, everybody has learned some valuable lessons."