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White House wants tougher rules on air travel compensation

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President Joe Biden says he wants to implement new compensation rules for airline passengers impacted by flight delays or cancellations.

The rules would require airlines to pay impacted passengers beyond a ticket refund if the carrier is responsible for the disruption.

This may involve covering meals and hotels in the event that travellers are stranded, officials said.

If implemented, it would be the first measure of its kind in the US.

On Monday (May 8) , Mr Biden and Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg announced the incoming set of rules at a White House news conference.

It comes just a few weeks after Mr Biden confirmed he will be running for re-election in 2024, and just ahead of the peak summer travel season.

Speaking in front of the slogan "holding airlines accountable", Mr Buttigieg said that the new rules are aimed at ensuring that passengers do not foot the bill if an airline is at fault for travel disruptions.

"This rule would, for the first time in US history, propose to require airlines to compensate passengers and cover expenses such as meals, hotels, and rebooking in cases where the airline has caused a cancellation or significant delay," Mr Buttigieg said in a statement.

The rules would also aim at defining what falls under a "controllable cancellation or delay" that is the fault of the carrier.

According to the US Bureau of Transportation Statistics, delays caused by airlines could include issues related to maintenance or crew problems, aircraft cleaning, baggage loading or fuelling.

Some airlines already offer travel credits or vouchers in the event of delays or cancellations, but the new rules would make passenger compensation, including refunds, mandatory for all.

The announcement is part of a broader push by the Biden administration to intervene on behalf of consumers around hot button issues including so-called resort fees and airline seating policies.

Last summer, the transport department launched an online dashboard that compares compensation policies of each US-based airline as a tool to pressure companies into offering more for customers.

In response, many major US airlines volunteered to provide meals and hotel rooms for customers who are stranded by delays that are in the airline's control.

But, according to the transport department's dashboard, no airlines in the US offer cash compensation to passengers who are stranded for more than three hours as part of their official policy.

In response to Monday's announcement, Airlines for America, which represents the biggest US carriers, said more than half of cancellations in 2022 and 2023 were caused by "extreme weather" or air traffic control outages.

In a statement to Reuters, it added that airlines "have no incentive to delay or cancel a flight and do everything in their control to ensure flights depart and arrive on time, but safety is always the top priority".

The current situation in the US around airline passenger compensation is far less generous than some other places around the world.

This includes the European Union and the United Kingdom, which require cash compensation of up to €600 ($660; £523) per passenger in the event of delays or cancellations that are the fault of the carrier.

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