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St. Croix Airport Lift Malfunction Strands Disabled Passengers

Spirit Airlines passenger misses wedding and medical appointment due to faulty lift; VIPA apologized and moved quickly to repair the system.

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Spirit Airlines at the Henry E. Rohlsen Airport on St. Croix. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

A malfunctioning lift system at the Henry E. Rohlsen Airport left a disabled passenger unable to board his Spirit Airlines flight on Saturday, while another disabled passenger aboard the same flight could not deboard due to the same issue. The V.I. Port Authority later identified the problem as a damaged hydraulic hose.

The lift, which costs upwards of \$100,000, has since been repaired, according to VIPA.

Delmo Francis, a 47-year-old disabled man, shared his ordeal with The Consortium, expressing frustration and disappointment over the situation. Mr. Francis had planned to attend a wedding on Sunday and a medical appointment on Monday in the mainland U.S. but said he was unaware of the lift malfunction until it was time to board.

“They told me the ramp wasn’t working when it was time to board, not when I checked in,” Mr. Francis explained. Spirit Airlines staff informed him that assisting him onto the plane manually would violate their policies, and his nephews, who were present to help, were also prohibited from lifting him.

The incident caused significant disruptions for Mr. Francis and his family. “We have to buy a ticket now for one of my brothers to fly down on Monday, but it’s still not certain that the lift will be fixed by then,” said Kira Francis, his sister, on Saturday.

Worldwide Flight Services rely on VIPA's lift, which it uses for airlines such as Spirit and Delta. When that system failed, Spirit and Delta Airlines passengers requiring assistance were affected, forcing both airlines to reschedule passengers. American Airlines, which operates its own ramp system, was not impacted.

VIPA Executive Director Carlton Dowe apologized for the inconvenience caused to passengers and explained that repairs had been delayed Saturday as mechanics worked to identify the issue. “The damaged hose has been identified, and repairs are expected to be completed by tomorrow,” Mr. Dowe said Saturday night. To ascertain swift recovery, Mr. Dowe had considered transferring a lift from St. Thomas to St. Croix as a contingency.

The incident highlights the need for greater equipment redundancy and contingency planning by the airlines and their ground handler partners, particularly for carriers like Spirit and Delta, which do not have their own lift for the St. Croix route. Mr. Dowe noted that St. Thomas benefits from multiple lifts owned by airlines and ground handlers, but St. Croix relies on limited resources.

“We are working to ensure such disruptions are minimized and are considering transferring a lift from St. Thomas to St. Croix as a contingency,” Mr. Dowe stated Saturday night, emphasizing VIPA’s commitment to addressing the issue.

Adding to the emotional toll of the incident, Mr. Francis revealed that his son, who would have stayed back to help him, had to participate in the wedding. “This is a big inconvenience for my family,” he said.

Federal regulations mandate equal access for disabled passengers, and the malfunction speaks to the importance of ensuring compliance through reliable infrastructure.

Mr. Dowe assured the public that accessibility remains a top priority for the Henry E. Rohlsen and Cyril E. King airports. Both Spirit and Delta Airlines are working to accommodate affected passengers.