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Travel Agents Help Consumers Save Under New Airline Pricing Structure

Alexandria, VA, April 6, 2016 –Several U.S.-based airlines, including American, Delta and United, have implemented subtle changes to their domestic pricing structure resulting in not-so-subtle changes to the cost of air travel, especially impacting the business traveler. The American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA) learned of these changes from its agent members who detected this change early, quickly began navigating through the complexities of the new pricing and started saving their clients money.

"The simple way to explain what is happening is that certain multi-segment itineraries now cost a significant amount when they are presented as a single ticket rather than multiple one-way tickets," said ASTA CEO Zane Kerby. "The negative impact is on the time it takes agents to issue multiple tickets for one-way flights. Consumers who book multi city or circle trips through their trusted travel agent can experience significant savings."

The changes were made to what the airlines call "combinable fare rules," which prohibit certain one-way flights from being combined into the same passenger name record. For example, if a traveler needs to fly from Los Angeles to Phoenix one day, from Los Angeles to Phoenix the next, and from Phoenix back home to New York, that all at once can be more than double the price of purchasing three separate one-way tickets.

- To quantify, an ASTA agency owner told ASTA on Monday: "A test itinerary I did this morning on an agency website showed the same ridiculously high fare display in the GDS, AA.com and Expedia. It cost roughly \$1,200 for a round-trip itinerary from Los Angeles to Phoenix and back to Los Angeles."

ticket; only \$450 for three tickets."

ASTA Chairman Roger Block, who is President of Travel Leaders Franchise Group, said, "The good news is that travel agents immediately spotted what was happening, and figured out a way to work around it."

Marc Casto, President and CEO at Casto in San Jose, Calif., who is Chair of ASTA's Corporate Advisory Council, said, "Because of the efforts of our peers and ourselves at Casto, we were able to identify these new cost clients' reservations to ensure these new costs were avoided." He added that "only through active travel agent management can the traveling public be assured they are receiving the best value for their dollar."

"This issue drives home a point we've always known – the best way for consumers to ensure they get the best value and service when they travel is to use a trusted agent," said Steve Orens, President of Plaza Travel in San Francisco. "Finding value for the traveler in a world of complex and ever-changing supplier rules is what we do every day."

Memphis-based Rebecca Martin, President of A&I Travel Management, Inc., said: "Even though it is an unintended consequence, the fact is that the only defense against these egregiously higher prices is to use a travel agent who will manually price and ticket circle trip and open jaw itineraries. Corporate online booking can't do it; online travel agencies and search engines can't do it; not even the airlines' own websites can't do it. Corporate online booking may change with time, but for right now, a manual touch is required and that's a powerful testament to a travel agent's ability to pivot as needed on behalf of valued customers."

ASTA's Government and Industry Affairs teams met with senior officials at the Department of Transportation and other issues last week to raise the concern, and continue to discuss the issue with the airlines, Global Distribution Systems, ASTA members and other stakeholders.

"This is yet another example of why it just makes sense to use a travel agent," said Kerby.