

ESSENTIAL AIR SERVICE

QUICK STATS

- ✘ **CONFERENCE:** Spending
- ✘ **TEAM:** Department of Transportation
- **FUMBLE:** \$263 million to fund the Essential Air Service
- **HOW TO RECOVER THE BALL:** Eliminate the program

Flying around the country on personal jet is typically a luxury reserved for the rich and famous. However, travelers to destinations funded by the Essential Air Service (EAS) may find themselves flying solo on a commercial jet sometime soon. The Airline Deregulation Act of 1978 created the EAS program to subsidize commercial flights to small community airports that operated before the deregulation of the airline industry.²⁰⁰ EAS was intended to be a temporary program to assist these airports with the transition into the free-market system.

However, as Milton Friedman said, “nothing is so permanent as a temporary government program.” With expiration looming in 1988, Congress provided the communities another 10 years to wean off the subsidies, eventually backtracking on transition and permanently enacting the EAS in 1996. DOT spent \$263 million in FY 2015 to support the traveling convenience subsidies, more than quintuple what it was in 1996 in inflation adjusted dollars.²⁰¹

A CBS investigative analysis found that 44 of the 113 EAS supported flight routes are two-thirds or more empty.²⁰² This includes a flight a reporter took with only 4 other passengers to Devils Lake, ND, a town of 7,000.²⁰³ This twice-a-day route costs taxpayers \$3.2 million annually. Taxpayers also subsidize flights to Hagerstown, MD to the

tune of \$560 per passenger, even though Dulles International Airport is a short 78-mile drive away.²⁰⁴ Approximately \$1.4 million is spent every year on passengers flying in and out of Franklin/Oil City, PA at a subsidy rate of \$927 per passenger, even though Pittsburgh is only 85 miles away. A flight from Kansas City, MO, to Great Bend, KS, serves on average only one passenger per day at the cost of \$1.4 million annually, which is subsidized by taxpayers at a cost of \$2,626 per person.²⁰⁵

Despite some small reforms to restrict program eligibility, spending on EAS continues to steadily rise in order to subsidize flights that often have fewer than ten passengers per day and cost more than \$500 per passenger. GAO found that low-cost flights at non-subsidized airports are often more convenient and cheaper than EAS flights.²⁰⁶ CBO recommended that Congress consider eliminating EAS in its budget options.²⁰⁷ Congress has yet to act on the recommendation.

RECOVERY

It is simply unfair to expect families in 99 percent of cities to subsidize convenient travel options for passengers flying in and out of the seldom-used 144 EAS airports. Congress should recognize that this 37-year temporary program is no longer essential and should eliminate it.

For more information, please visit:

[CRS Report: Essential Air Service](#)

[CBS News: Is Essential Air Service wasting taxpayer money?](#)

[DOT: EAS Communities](#)

[KCTV 5 News: Investigation finds taxpayers fund nearly empty flights](#)

[GAO: Commercial Aviation: Status of Air Service to Small Communities and the Federal Programs Involved](#)

[CBO: Eliminate the Essential Air Service Program](#)