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## United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE,  
AND TRANSPORTATION

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6125

WEBSITE: <http://commerce.senate.gov>

May 18, 2020

JOHN KEAST, STAFF DIRECTOR  
DAVID STRICKLAND, DEMOCRATIC STAFF DIRECTOR

Elaine L. Chao, Secretary  
Department of Transportation  
1200 New Jersey Avenue, S.E.  
Washington, D.C. 20590

Dear Secretary Chao:

On May 6, 2020, the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation held a hearing about the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the aviation industry. Following the hearing, I sent a letter to the White House Coronavirus Task Force calling for the establishment of clear, uniform, national COVID-19 guidelines for the aviation sector to keep the traveling public and workers safe during the coronavirus crisis. It has been almost two weeks and the Task Force has not provided any guidelines to airlines or airports. With approximately 20,000 new cases per day, time is of the essence. Today, I am calling on the Department of Transportation to issue guidelines to airlines and airports consistent with recommendations made by public health experts.

At the hearing, Dr. Hilary Godwin, the Dean of Public Health at the University of Washington, called for a net of public health protections, including minimizing contact between passengers. As Dr. Godwin noted, “[W]hat we know from public health is that it’s that close proximity of individuals for an extended period of time that creates the greatest risk of transmission.” I commend the airlines that have taken action to ensure that passengers are not seated in middle seats or have otherwise provided for additional distancing.

Yet, there are reports of full flights, and it has become all too common to see pictures of crowded flights shared by worried passengers. To be effective, these guidelines need to be uniform. The public expects no less. As air travelers gradually return, they must feel confident that they will be safe from the coronavirus. A consistent approach by airlines, guided by federal agencies, will be more effective in thwarting the spread of COVID-19 than if no guidelines are in place.

The federal government, starting with the Department of Transportation, must issue clear and uniform guidelines on social distancing for passengers and other public health measures. The Department’s guidance should clearly lead the airlines to either keep middle or adjacent seats open, or limit capacity of aircraft to a level that allows adequate social distancing. Prior to flight, airlines and airport operators should cooperate to maintain physical distancing – a minimum six feet – as much as possible during check-in, security check, pre-boarding, and boarding. Other guidelines that follow the science-based recommendations of public health experts should also be considered as necessary.

While no one measure in and of itself will solve this problem, protections such as social distancing can have a significant impact on the traveling public's safety and confidence. The traveling public deserves and should expect your leadership during this public health crisis, and the aviation industry is too important to our economy and the national interest to be operating without clear and consistent federal guidance.

Thank you in advance for your prompt attention to this request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Maria Cantwell". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "M" and a long, sweeping underline.

Maria Cantwell  
Ranking Member