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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE,
AND TRANSPORTATION

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6125

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

JOHN KEAST, STAFF DIRECTOR
DAVID STRICKLAND, DEMOCRATIC STAFF DIRECTOR

May 11, 2020

Vice President Mike Pence
White House Coronavirus Task Force
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dr. Robert R. Redfield
Director
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
395 E Street SW
Washington, DC 20024

Dr. Anthony Fauci
Director
National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases
5601 Fishers Lane, MSC 9806
Bethesda, MD 20892

Dear Vice President Pence, Dr. Redfield, and Dr. Fauci:

I write to you in your capacities as members of the White House Coronavirus Task Force asking that federal guidelines be established for the aviation sector and the traveling public. Last week the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation held a hearing about the importance of the aviation industry and what it will take to keep the traveling public safe from the coronavirus. At the hearing we heard from the airlines, airports, aerospace sector, as well as Dr. Hilary Godwin, the Dean of Public Health at the University of Washington. To date, airlines, airports, and federal agencies have implemented inconsistent measures to thwart the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) through the aviation system.

To instill public confidence and mitigate a resurgence of the coronavirus from increased travel, we need clear, uniform, national guidelines for airlines and airports based on the best information from our public health experts. If those guidelines are not followed, we need oversight from the federal agencies to protect the traveling public and the workers throughout the aviation system.

At the Senate Commerce Committee hearing about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the aviation industry, Dr. Hilary Godwin testified to the importance of having national guidelines and that no one measure in and of itself will solve this problem, so we need to weave a net of protections to have the biggest impact. According to Dr. Godwin, this net could include the following measures:

- Contact and travel information gathering to aid in contact tracing;
- Communicating to passengers, workers, and the public about good hygiene;
- Screening individuals for symptoms prior to travel;
- Minimizing contact between individuals at screening points and during flights;
- Wearing masks and gloves when appropriate;
- Frequently cleaning high touch surfaces;
- Requiring HEPA filters on airplanes;
- Making hand sanitizer readily available;
- Requiring passenger, and airport and airline worker attestation to being asymptomatic; and
- COVID-19 testing at airport entry points, once there is widespread availability of inexpensive point-of-care tests.

While not all measures are appropriate for all circumstances, the more measures weaved to form the net will decrease the risk to workers and the public. In addition, if those measures are not consistent throughout the system they will be less effective. For example, most airlines have announced they will require passengers to wear masks and the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has announced it will require its employees at airport screening points to wear masks. Some airports have started to require passengers to wear masks throughout airports to ensure they do not increase risk of transmission, but that is not yet widespread. When a well-respected scientist like Dr. Godwin says that we need uniform national standards to avoid a patchwork of regulations that will put holes in the net, the federal government should listen.

One key measure that is challenging but necessary to implement in the aviation system is contact tracing. The federal government, through the Public Health Service Act, has the responsibility for preventing the introduction, transmission, and spread of communicable diseases from foreign countries into the United States and from one state or U.S. possession to another. However, this system is not set up to detect people that may have been exposed to a fast-moving illness like COVID-19. Accordingly, the federal government must move quickly to develop a protocol to collect contact information for passengers to aid public health authorities' contact tracing efforts.

Finally, on March 10, 2020, after witnesses from the Department of Transportation, Customs and Border Protection, and the CDC testified at a U.S. Senate Commerce Committee hearing, I wrote to you to clarify which federal agency is responsible for issuing guidance or mandates for aircraft cleaning requirements and for ensuring that the guidance is followed. I have not yet received a response to that letter. What remains clear is that airlines and airports need further guidance and clarity on where in the federal government to go to get that information.

Again, the federal government must issue clear and uniform guidelines to our airlines and the traveling public. These must include contact tracing, cleaning, social distancing, personal protective equipment, and other measures, based on CDC and other scientific-based guidance to ensure the safety of workers and passengers. The aviation industry is extremely important to a fully functioning economy and the federal government should be able to balance the need for it to operate efficiently and protect workers and passengers.

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