



Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Peter A. DeFazio  
Chairman

Katherine W. Dedrick, Staff Director

Sam Graves  
Ranking Member

Paul J. Sass, Republican Staff Director

February 26, 2020

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

Dear Secretary Chao:

Yesterday, a Centers for Disease Control (CDC) official stated in a press briefing that it is not a question of *if* the novel coronavirus COVID-19 will spread further into the United States, but rather a question of *when*.<sup>1</sup> The virus has sickened nearly 82,000 people worldwide and has killed at least 2,770 as of today.<sup>2</sup>

The Ebola outbreak in 2014 should have served as a wakeup call for the Department of Transportation, in collaboration with airline and airport partners and other Federal departments and agencies, to develop a plan to limit the spread of pandemics through the aviation system. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) studied aviation stakeholders' preparedness in 2015 and recommended that:

[t]o help improve the U.S. aviation sector's preparedness for future communicable disease threats from abroad, the Secretary of Transportation should work with relevant stakeholders, such as the Department of Health and Human Services, to develop a national aviation-preparedness plan for communicable disease outbreaks. Such a plan could establish a mechanism for coordination between the aviation and public health sectors and provides clear and transparent planning assumptions for a variety of types and levels of communicable disease threats.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Pam Belluck and Noah Weiland, *C.D.C. Officials Warn of Coronavirus Outbreaks in the U.S.*, N.Y. TIMES (Feb. 25, 2020), at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/25/health/coronavirus-us.html> (emphasis added).

<sup>2</sup> K.K. Rebecca Lai, Jin Wu, Richard Harris, Allison McCann, Derek Watkins and Jugal K. Patel, *Coronavirus Map: Tracking the Spread of the Outbreak*, N.Y. TIMES (Feb. 26, 2020), at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/world/asia/china-wuhan-coronavirus-maps.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Gov't Accountability Office, *Air Travel and Communicable Diseases: Comprehensive Federal Plan Needed for U.S. Aviation System's Preparedness* 43, Rpt. No. GAO-16-127 (December 2015), at <https://www.gao.gov/assets/680/674224.pdf>.

The Hon. Elaine L. Chao

February 26, 2020

Page 2

According to the GAO, the Department has not implemented this recommendation, and the Department's failure to do so is a reflection of a broader lack of preparedness for arrival of a pandemic on our shores. We must not let a laissez-faire attitude toward public health endanger the welfare of people across the country.

Further, the lack of effective Federal-led coordination and collaboration with industry in responding to the COVID-19 outbreak has become apparent over the last several weeks. U.S. airlines have expressed concern about the scope of CDC requests and expectations regarding airlines' collection of certain inbound passenger data, and CDC officials have expressed concern about their ability to access information from the airlines. Had the Department implemented the GAO's recommendation that the Department "develop a national aviation-preparedness plan for communicable disease outbreaks," providing for "coordination between the aviation and public health sectors," the U.S. government and the aviation sector may have been better able to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak.

We therefore request that you provide, in writing, a detailed explanation of specific measures the Department is currently taking to work with airlines, airports, and other Federal departments and agencies to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 within the United States. Please provide this information to Committee staff no later than close of business Friday, March 6, 2020. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Alex Burkett, Aviation Subcommittee Democratic Staff Director and Special Adviser for Aviation Safety, at (202) 225-9161 or by e-mail at [alex.burkett@mail.house.gov](mailto:alex.burkett@mail.house.gov).

Thank you for your prompt attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



PETER A. DeFAZIO  
Chair



RICK LARSEN  
Chair  
Subcommittee on Aviation