



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

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**Chairman**

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November 24, 2020

The Honorable Gene Dodaro  
Comptroller General of the United States  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street NW  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is having profound effects on every aspect of our society. An estimated 12.5 million Americans have been infected and nearly 260,000 Americans have died since the beginning of this year. Fear and anxiety have prompted millions of people to cancel or postpone travel plans, avoid public gatherings, and curtail many of the comings and goings of everyday life. As a result, air travel has plummeted by as much as 90 percent during the pandemic compared to just a year ago, causing billions of dollars in financial losses and tens of thousands of workers to be furloughed by U.S. airlines and their contractors.

Unfortunately, these losses do not negate the fact that air travel, more than any other mode of transportation, has the greatest potential to carry this disease from one part of the world to another. Accordingly, until a vaccine is widely available, reducing the spread of COVID-19 through air travel and revitalizing the U.S. airline industry will depend in large part on a better understanding of how diseases, particularly those that are airborne, spread through air travel and identifying technologies and practices that can help mitigate disease transmission.

Moreover, COVID-19 is only the latest communicable disease to raise public health concerns about how diseases spread through air travel. Notwithstanding COVID-19, there have been five other major public health epidemics with global ramifications within the last two decades, bookended by the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2003 and the Ebola virus outbreak in 2014. In December 2015, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) even published a report warning about the dangers of communicable disease transmission through air travel.<sup>1</sup> The GAO found that, while the United States is a signatory to an international treaty that obligates

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<sup>1</sup> Gov't Accountability Office, GAO-16-127, *Air Travel and Communicable Diseases: Comprehensive Federal Plan Needed for U.S. Aviation System's Preparedness* (2015).

member states to develop a national aviation preparedness plan for communicable disease outbreaks, the United States has yet to develop such a plan.<sup>2</sup> The GAO recommended that the Department of Transportation work with the Departments of Health and Human Services and Homeland Security to develop this plan.<sup>3</sup> While the DOT did not dispute the need for a plan, the Department disagreed that it should lead this effort.<sup>4</sup> Sadly, this has left the Federal government without a plan in place that could have helped prepare Federal agencies, airports, and airlines for the COVID-19 pandemic. As the GAO recently reported, some aviation stakeholders have publicly noted that a lack of a coordinated response may have led to some of the confusion and chaos at certain airports that occurred earlier this year following the COVID-19 travel bans and increased screening efforts.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, we request the GAO undertake a series of three studies that will help inform Congress about the risks of air travel during a public health crisis, better understand the Federal response that has been taken to address these risks, and to identify lessons learned that can inform future Federal legislation.

First, we request the GAO conduct a review of recent government, academic, and industry research on disease transmission via air travel. This review should identify what is known through this research about disease transmission and effective mitigation practices and technologies that can be implemented for the different phases of air travel. This review should cover all relevant phases of air travel, including airport departure and screening, passenger boarding, in-flight movement of passengers and crew members, passenger arrival and deplaning, aircraft cabin ventilation, airport and aircraft cleaning and disinfection, testing for disease identification and passenger contact tracing, and airline and airport worker safety. The GAO should also identify any important gaps in research. This information will help inform policies to help ensure passenger and crew safety and revitalize the airline industry.

Second, we request the GAO identify the roles and responsibilities of various authorities at the local, state, and Federal levels, as well as the roles and responsibilities of private and public bodies such as airports, airlines, and their contractors, in controlling disease transmission through air travel. This study should identify areas of overlap, gaps, and disagreement among the relevant entities' respective roles and responsibilities. It should also describe local, state, and Federal legal authorities regarding responsibility for communicable disease transmission via air travel, and how those legal authorities have been implemented. This review should expand upon the GAO's previous reports and help the DOT develop a national aviation preparedness plan.

Third, we request the GAO undertake an assessment of the aviation industry's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This report should provide lessons learned by aviation regulators and stakeholders that could assist with preparedness planning; identify successful disease mitigation strategies, including operational practices and technologies; and recommend any changes to current laws, regulation, and industry practices.

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<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 43.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> Gov't Accountability Office, GAO-20-655T, *Air Travel and Communicable Diseases: Status of Research Efforts and Action Still Needed to Develop Federal Preparedness Plan* at p.7 (2020).

We appreciate your attention to this request. The three studies should be undertaken sequentially with the first study completed within 9 months of this date so that it can be used to inform the work of the Committee. Should you have questions or need additional information, please contact Brian Bell with the Subcommittee on Aviation at [Brian.Bell@mail.house.gov](mailto:Brian.Bell@mail.house.gov).

Sincerely,



PETER A. DeFAZIO  
Chair



RICK LARSEN  
Chair  
Subcommittee on Aviation