

**United States House of Representatives
House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure**

The Honorable Peter DeFazio - Chair

***On the Front Lines: The Impacts of COVID-19 on
Transportation Workers***

Tuesday, June 9, 2020



Testimony of

Susannah Carr

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Dear Chairman DeFazio, Ranking Member Graves, and Members of the Committee:

My name is Susannah Carr. I am a Flight Attendant with United Airlines, based at Newark Liberty International Airport. On behalf of the 50,000 members of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, AFL-CIO (AFA), and millions of workers in aviation and across the transportation sector, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the risks we face on the front lines of the pandemic and the important work Congress has done to protect my job and those of hundreds of thousands of aviation workers in the air and on the ground.

COVID-19 remains an unprecedented threat to aviation. Hundreds of flight attendants have tested positive for the virus and 10 have lost their lives. Three months in, commercial volume is still down by more than 85 percent from last year. As a result of the pandemic, nearly 1,000 U.S. Flight Attendants have lost jobs permanently and thousands more have accepted voluntary furloughs or leaves. Trans States Airlines and Compass Airlines have both shuttered since the onset of COVID-19, while Norwegian closed U.S. Flight Attendant bases at the end of March (Flight Attendants have contractual recall rights for 2 years if operations resume) and Cathay Pacific announced it will end U.S. based operations as of June 20, 2020. Longtime charter carrier Miami Air filed for bankruptcy on March 24, 2020, solely as a result of the pandemic, risking 350 jobs in the Miami area.

The health and economic impacts of COVID-19 are significant, and just as air travel changed in the aftermath of 9/11, it will need to change now to adapt to the new realities of the post-pandemic world. I'm grateful for the opportunity to testify today, and to share my experience with how COVID-19 is affecting the work, health, and financial security of flight attendants.

Federal COVID-19 Health and Safety Rules Are Needed to Protect Passengers and Workers:

Although I have remained active consistently throughout the pandemic, my last working flight was on March 22, 2020. It was a return flight from Zurich, United's last direct flight. I remember how concerned the passengers were about being able to get home. Many were wearing masks or covering their faces with scarves or other clothing. Some had on gloves. Many of the passengers refused to take any of the service items from us, trying to limit their contact. You could feel the tension on the plane. People were visibly worried about anyone moving around and they worked hard to stay away from other passengers.

Although masks were available for emergencies we were discouraged from wearing them during normal procedures. We wore gloves, which we changed frequently, and used disinfectant wipes to clean our workspaces. We used hand sanitizer each time we came through the galley. As a first responder, I wanted to reassure passengers that I was doing everything I possibly could do

to get them home safely. All of us on the frontlines have had the same experience, that same feeling.

We know a lot more now than we did in March about the virus. I know that we need clear, enforceable federal rules for health and safety that will protect our passengers, all of us serving as essential workers and our families at home, and millions of businesses counting on the resumption of safe commercial air travel.

The response to COVID-19, the biggest crisis aviation has ever faced, has been a hodge-podge of individual voluntarily-adopted measures by airlines. The best available public health information confirms that crew and passenger use of masks and cloth face coverings, along with proper hand hygiene and social distancing, can help to limit the health risks of air travel. The airlines took an important step when they put policies in place requiring masks, but in the absence of federal requirements, these policies and related communication will remain inconsistent and unclear. Enforcement will be nearly impossible. And, we can't count on consistent procedures in the airports either, which leaves many vulnerabilities and opportunities for spread.

Thus far, federal agencies have failed to provide the clear rules we need to keep people safe. On May 11, 2020, the FAA updated a previous guidance document (non-required) for air carrier operators, SAFO 20009,¹ to include an expanded CDC list of COVID-19 symptoms,² but still did not require the use of masks or other personal protective equipment (PPE) by crew and passengers. At least one carrier, Omni, has refused to follow SAFO guidelines, assigning discipline to flight attendants when sick, and outright refuses to notify passengers and crew who may have been exposed.

No flight attendant wants to tell a scared passenger that there's nothing we can do to make them feel safe. Flight attendants and gate agents need full management support and the authority to enforce airline policies that keep everyone safe and defuse tensions. Without the reinforcement that comes with federal rules - the same regulations we use to stop smokers and get people to sit down and buckle up - we're being set up to fail. And that will put passengers and crew at risk.

On June 1, our union wrote again to the U.S. Departments of Transportation (DOT) and Health and Human Services (HHS) to urge the Departments to issue emergency safety and health rules for aviation during the COVID-19 pandemic. We cited the emergency measures taken to address airline security following the events of September 11, 2001, and more recent health and safety measures, including the recent DOT ban on e-cigarette use aboard aircraft, the purpose of which was to "reduce the risk of adverse health effects on passengers and crewmembers." Specifically, we asked that DOT promulgate an emergency rule for the duration of the pandemic that includes the following specific measures for all commercial flights:

¹ FAA; COVID-19: Updated Interim Occupational Health and Safety Guidance for Air Carriers and Crews; May 11, 2020. https://www.faa.gov/other_visit/aviation_industry/airline_operators/airline_safety/safos/all_safos/media/2020/SAFO20009.pdf. Accessed May 18, 2020.

² CDC; Symptoms of Coronavirus; Page last reviewed: May 13, 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/symptoms.html>. Accessed May 18, 2020.

- All airplane cabin occupants must wear a mask or cloth face covering per CDC guidelines.³ Masks should be worn at all times, except as necessary for eating, drinking, or during other similar, temporary activities. Incidents involving passenger violations of this rule should be considered interfering in a crewmember's duties in violation of 14 CFR §§ 91.11 or 121.580, or 49 USC § 46504.
- Flight attendants, as aviation's first responders and potential carriers of the virus without proper protection, must be provided N95 masks, gloves, and other PPE. While we recognize the challenges originally created due to supply chains, we reiterate the need to implement this standard as soon as practicable following proper provisioning of hospital workers and other health care professionals.
- Government must establish and conduct health monitoring for passengers and crewmembers, which could include temperature checks, signs/symptoms, travel history, and viral or antibody testing. While these measures will not prevent every asymptomatic person (who may still be capable of transmitting the virus) from boarding a flight, they will minimize this risk and deter abuse.
- Social distancing standards in the cabin must be set; this may require defining hard load limits that vary depending on specific airplane cabin configurations. Although this could result in more aircraft placed into service for the duration of the pandemic, minimizing the spread of COVID-19 on aircraft should decrease the duration of the emergency.
- Require airlines to meet cleaning standards to disinfect, or sanitize, per appropriate CDC guidance, aircraft cabin surfaces after each flight.
- Maximum cabin air ventilation rates must be required, particularly during boarding and deplaning, and High Efficiency Particulate Air (HEPA) filters must be installed and replaced per manufacturer's instructions.

It is clear to anyone working a flight that the current environment of inconsistent and voluntary airline policies is not working as it should. These airline policies and practices are poorly communicated to crew and passengers alike, leaving flight attendants to risk our health and safety while attempting to manage the otherwise avoidable conflicts that result. Our passengers deserve better.

As we look forward to the recovery of commercial air travel, our goal must be to raise the standards of safety and the confidence of all who fly. Enforceable, mandatory, national standards, including those outlined here, will protect my colleagues, protect our passengers, and help our industry take off again.

Payroll Support Program:

When the pandemic hit, my fellow flight attendants and I were immediately concerned for our safety and the safety of our passengers. But we also worried about our jobs and paychecks. Air travel quickly ground to a halt. Airports looked like ghost towns. It was clear aviation would collapse without intervention, and along with it all of our jobs.

³ CDC; Use of Cloth Face Coverings to Help Slow the Spread of COVID-19; <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/diy-cloth-face-coverings.html>; Accessed May 18, 2020.

While I am currently available to work a full schedule, the flying isn't there. In the month of April, I had four trips scheduled, all of which were cancelled, and no reassignment was given. During the month of May I was on Reserve and was given one airport assignment. During the airport standby I was called to the gate to work pre boarding, but I ultimately did not work the flight. For the month of June I am on Reserve again and have been released with pay each day thus far. There are no trips to pick up. Normally you would have several trips a day become available to add hours to your schedule. Most of us worked many more hours than our minimum guarantees to make ends meet, but that is impossible now. I know that without Congressional intervention, I would have been furloughed for several months already and reliant on unemployment if I could get it. I know so many who have struggled to even get their unemployment checks.

That's why I am so grateful to the members of this committee and the leadership of my union. Thanks to their hard work and foresight that day has yet to come. Congress passed the Payroll Support Program (PSP) in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act in March to keep the dedicated, highly-trained and credentialed workforce of the aviation industry paid, connected to our healthcare, and out of the unemployment lines.

Funding for the PSP goes exclusively toward maintaining the salaries, wages, and benefits of my fellow aviation workers and me. It also conditions the carriers' receipt of the funding on refraining from any involuntary furloughs prior to September 30th, 2020--a provision that prevented the kinds of mass unemployment we've seen in other industries from happening in the aviation industry. Instead, this historic, workers first relief package has saved our jobs and kept us connected to our benefits. It has kept our industry intact - and that means the millions of people who make up aviation.

If you take only one message from my testimony today, let it be this: the PSP is working. Though my hours are down given the decline in demand for air travel, I'm still getting paid and so are my fellow flight attendants. This means we can still pay our rents and mortgages, we can still put food on the table for our families, and we can still cover other necessary expenses, like copays for prescription drugs. We're also still covered by our employer-sponsored health insurance--a pretty big relief since the idea of losing my health insurance in the middle of a global pandemic is terrifying. And, because we're still getting paid, we're still paying taxes and contributing to our local economies as consumers.

The PSP is not perfect. Two issues undercut the value of the payroll support program for workers. First, Congress did not fully fund the program, providing \$25 billion instead of the full \$31 billion needed to fully cover payroll and benefits for airline workers across the industry. Treasury determined the fair approach was to prorate each airline's payroll grant allocation to 76% of the requested amount.

Second, Treasury exercised the option under the Act to attach financial instruments to the grants and require 30% of the payroll grant over \$100 million be treated instead as a loan. Together these actions by the Treasury resulted in a \$12 billion shortfall. To cover the gap, approximately 40,000 Flight Attendants across the industry, nearly 35 percent of the entire U.S. Flight Attendant workforce, have voluntarily taken leave to help ensure the payroll grants are able to support those who remain on active status.

The PSP has also been jeopardized by a small handful of bad actors who have proceeded to flout the CARES Act by cutting hours and cheating workers, despite taking PSP funding. I'm lucky to be a member of a union and covered by a collective bargaining agreement, which stipulates my pay is protected by a minimum number of hours in our contract. Delta Air Lines has refused to guarantee this same minimum standard for flight attendants, despite taking federal PSP funds. The program was explicitly intended to protect workers, keep us in our jobs even if not "on the job" at the same rate. The program was about stability for those of us who work and have built our lives around the paychecks and benefits we need to protect ourselves, our families, and remain available to serve as essential workers now, and be in place to lift our economy without delay once COVID-19 is contained.

Thus far, Secretary Mnuchin and the Treasury have been unwilling to fully enforce the CARES Act and ensure that the funds are used as Congress intended. Despite letters from members of Congress and repeated requests by our union, Treasury has not responded to requests that they issue guidance to carriers to make clear that slashing hours is a violation of the grant program. While the vast majority of airlines have used the payroll grants as intended, Treasury's silence on the outliers has facilitated the cut hours and allowed a few bad actors to attempt to set up a competition on the backs of airline workers. Absent additional pressure and oversight from Congress, I worry that more aviation workers will see cuts to their hours and pay. I would ask that the members of this committee reach out to the officials at Treasury, including Secretary Mnuchin, who are overseeing the PSP, and ask that they put a stop to these cuts and enforce the law as Congress intended.

The PSP has saved the jobs of hundreds of thousands of aviation workers, including mine. It has given me financial security and emotional security. This is a historic workers first relief package and the members of this committee should be proud of this legislation and what it has accomplished. But we have to make sure that a lapse in this critical protection does not undo the good work that was started.

The program is set to expire on September 30th and the time to prepare for October 1 is now. When CARES was written it was expected the industry would be closer to full recovery by the fall. It is clear now, that will not happen. At a minimum, Congress should extend the program through the New Year as was already done for the Paycheck Protection Program. An extension of the PSP through January 31st will ensure that we do not see a wave of layoffs in the aviation industry flood unemployment offices in October. While airlines have had time to stabilize the operation with reduced capacity, it is now my job and nearly 500,000 other aviation jobs that are on the line October 1, 2020 without an extension of the program. The program is already in place. It just needs to be extended.

It is an honor to represent my flying partners and other aviation workers here today. We are so grateful for the work of Chairman DeFazio this entire committee. We are counting on your continued action to make sure we don't have to face the loss of our jobs this fall. Safety is fundamental to the success of air travel because consumer demand simply will not rebound without confidence in safe air travel. The people on the frontlines of aviation need your continued support on this and our jobs in order to ensure aviation, and all of the people within it, can continue to support the U.S. economy. Thank you for your time, attention, and action. I look forward to your questions.