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Congress of the United States
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IN EUROPE (U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION)

April 27, 2020

Mrs. Elaine Chao
Secretary
Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue SE
Washington, DC 20590

Mr. Stephen Dickson
Administrator
Federal Aviation Administration
800 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20591

Mr. Alex M. Azar II
Secretary
Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dr. Robert R. Redfield
Director
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
1600 Clifton Road
Atlanta, GA 30329

Dear Secretary Chao, Secretary Azar, Administrator Dickson and Director Redfield,

I am writing to express my concern that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines on the use of cloth face coverings to help slow the spread of COVID-19 are not being followed on airplanes, where there is incredible exposure and risk.

As the CDC noted on April 3, 2020, “We now know from recent studies that a significant portion of individuals with coronavirus lack symptoms and that even those who eventually develop symptoms can transmit the virus to others before showing symptoms. This means that the virus can spread between people interacting in close proximity—for example, speaking, coughing, or sneezing—even

if those people are not exhibiting symptoms.”¹ The CDC also recommended that individuals wear cloth face coverings in public settings where other social distancing measures are difficult to maintain. It is quite evident that airplanes fall into this category and that airlines should have extra precautions put into place to protect all crewmembers and passengers.

While I was pleased that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) updated its Safety Alert for Operators (SAFO) on April 16, 2020, I remain concerned that our nation’s airlines are failing to follow this guidance.²

For instance, on April 23, 2020, I flew from Washington DC to Charlotte, North Carolina on an American Airlines flight. There were several factors that contributed to this being an unsafe and uncomfortable situation, including that the majority of flight attendants – both working and traveling – did not have on personal protective equipment (PPE) or even cloth face coverings, over half of the passengers did not have any type of cloth face covering, and many persons and off-duty personnel talked and traversed within the aisle. Because of this, each person’s health and safety was unnecessarily put at risk.

Unfortunately, no matter how you configure seating, social distancing at six feet on an airplane is difficult. But we know that masks are one of the most effective tools to mitigate people’s risk of exposure when those around them are also wearing masks. As air travel continues to increase while the country slowly starts to reopen, it’s imperative that the flying public feel safe and comfortable in doing so. This should include the requirement of masks, which will accomplish this goal and protect both crew members and passengers.

We must all work together to do everything possible to decrease the risk of transmission of COVID-19 onboard aircraft and through air travel. Therefore, I respectfully request that the FAA, in conjunction with the CDC, update its guidance to airlines to ensure more robust safety protections are put in place for frontline workers and passengers including the requirement of face coverings for all employees of air carriers, their crews and passengers.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this important issue. Should you have any questions regarding these requests, please contact Alex Schnelle in my office at alex.schnelle@mail.house.gov or 202-225-3265.

Sincerely,



Steve Cohen
Member of Congress

¹ “Recommendation Regarding the Use of Cloth Face Coverings, Especially in Areas of Significant Community-Based Transmission,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/cloth-face-cover.html>

² “COVID-19: Updated Interim Occupational Health and Safety Guidance for Air Carriers and Crews,” FAA, https://www.faa.gov/other_visit/aviation_industry/airline_operators/airline_safety/safo/all_safo/media/2020/SAFO20009.pdf

- c: Mr. Ed Bastian, Chief Executive Officer, Delta Airlines
- Mr. Doug Parker, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, American Airlines
- Mr. Oscar Munoz, President and Chief Executive Officer, United Airlines
- Mr. Gary C. Kelly, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, Southwest Airlines