

U.S. TRAVEL
A S S O C I A T I O N[®]

WRITTEN STATEMENT

OF

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ON

**“CLIMBING AGAIN: STAKEHOLDER VIEWS ON RESUMING AIR
TRAVEL IN THE COVID-19 ERA”**

**BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION & MARITIME SECURITY
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Chairman Correa, Ranking Member Lesko, members of the Subcommittee, good afternoon.

I'm Tori Emerson Barnes, Executive Vice President of Public Affairs and Policy for the U.S. Travel Association. Thank you for inviting the broader travel industry to participate in this important hearing.

U.S. Travel is the only association that represents all sectors of the travel industry—airports, hotels, state and local tourism offices, car rental companies, theme parks and attractions and many others. I am here today to discuss the hurdles we must overcome to restore air travel and what Congress, TSA, CBP and the entire travel industry can do to help.

Before the devastating COVID-19 pandemic, \$1.1 trillion in traveler spending in the U.S. generated a \$2.6 trillion total economic impact and supported 15.8 million jobs. But now the nation's seventh-largest workforce has been cut in half, with more than eight million jobs lost—totaling a third of all jobs lost since March.¹ Further, we are on track to lose half a trillion dollars in spending by the end of the year, representing a total economic impact nine times greater than the 9/11 attacks.² Following the attacks, it took the travel industry 18 months to recover, indicating the travel industry's recovery time from this crisis could take several years.

Simply put, the only way to restore the economy will be to restore travel. And to restore travel, we must make sure Americans are willing and able to fly again. Unfortunately, recent data shows that air travel may be the slowest sector of the industry to rebound.

According to a June 1 survey by Destination Analysts, more than half of Americans (55%) said they would feel safe taking a road trip, compared to just 21% who said they would

¹ https://www.ustravel.org/sites/default/files/media_root/document/TravelDepression_FactSheet.pdf

² https://www.ustravel.org/sites/default/files/media_root/document/TravelDepression_FactSheet.pdf

feel safe traveling by air.³ The same survey found that more than half of Americans said they hope to take a road trip before October of this year. Conversely, 53% of Americans said they won't fly again until at least March 2021, if not later.

We clearly have a long way to go in restoring travelers' confidence in air travel. While there are several opportunities and solutions, today I would like to focus on three areas:

1. Implementing health and safety protocols to protect aviation workers and customers;
2. Clearly communicating with travelers about what's being done to keep them safe; and
3. Steps that Congress can take to accelerate recovery and invest in the long-term competitiveness of our nation's aviation industry.

First, changes must be made throughout the entire air travel system to promote the health of travelers and workers alike. After 9/11, industry leaders said, "Without security, there will be no travel." The global pandemic requires a similar approach and demands a comprehensive response. Without guidance to promote the health and safety of travelers, there can be no travel, no reopening of businesses and no revival of our economy.

To that end, U.S. Travel convened a task force of health experts and travel industry leaders—including airports, airlines and 30 other industry organizations—to create a core set of health and safety guidance that the industry can adapt to reopen responsibly.⁴ This guidance has been included with our testimony.

This comprehensive guidance aligns with CDC guidelines for reopening America and includes:

³ <https://www.destinationanalysts.com/blog-update-on-american-travel-in-the-period-of-coronavirus-week-of-june-1st/>

⁴ https://www.ustravel.org/sites/default/files/media_root/document/HealthandSafetyGuidance.pdf

- Limiting crowding in public spaces;
- Providing touchless solutions for identification and payments;
- Enhancing sanitation;
- Encouraging health screening of employees and customers;
- Modifying food and beverage preparation; and
- Developing procedures for if an employee tests positive for COVID-19.

This guidance is being implemented across the industry. Most major domestic airlines have adapted to this “new normal” by requiring passengers to wear masks.⁵ Airports have modified spaces to allow for physical distancing and have stringent disinfecting procedures in place. CLEAR, a contactless identification system, has proven invaluable in providing a hygienic, secure alternative to traditional identity verification measures.

TSA and CBP must also take steps to protect the health and safety of travelers and officers. Similar to actions taken in other segments of the travel industry, TSA can focus resources on requiring masks at security checkpoints, modifying security lines to allow for physical distancing and enhancing sanitation at checkpoints.

As with every other segment of air travel, TSA and CBP must take a flexible, layered and risk-based approach to its health and safety protocols across airports. For example, physical distancing is an asset, but it will be a dynamic challenge at some airports with limitations on physical space. Where physical distancing is not fully possible, other measures such as transmission barriers must be put in place. Similar to security challenges, we will never be able to eliminate 100% of the risk, but a coherent, layered, risk-based response from TSA and CBP can be enormously beneficial. Passengers need to see a thoughtful and rational approach from

⁵ <https://www.airlines.org/news/major-u-s-airlines-announce-increased-enforcement-of-face-coverings/>

government officials. As we saw in the early days of TSA, once a security screening standard is introduced, it is hard to roll back. Any measures put in place related to COVID-19 must be temporary and then eased as the threat of the virus is eliminated or reduced.

For these reasons, the broader travel industry has not taken a position on whether TSA should conduct temperature checks at airport checkpoints. During the development of U.S. Travel's health and safety guidance, public health experts did not broadly recommend temperature checks, due in large part to differing views as to whether temperature checks are a reliable tactic to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Concerns included the likelihood of false negatives and false positives.

There are also significant questions as to how TSA would operationalize temperature checks, handle passengers who record a high temperature and the family members or companions traveling with them, and more. Without answers to these questions and without a clear recommendation from public health officials that temperature checks are absolutely necessary, we have not yet endorsed a requirement for TSA to conduct temperature checks.

All of our recommended measures will require TSA and CBP to have adequate funding and staffing. While the CARES Act provided \$100 million to airports for janitorial services, TSA has told airports that these funds may only be used to sanitize checked bag drop, TSA checkpoints or TSA offices. Limiting the scope of janitorial services to these locations minimizes the effectiveness of cleaning and provides little relief to airports; we believe these restrictions are inconsistent with the intended purpose of this funding. TSA should expand the use of CARES Act sanitation services to include all highly trafficked or high-touch areas at airports, including restrooms, food service, seating and touched surfaces.

Additionally, now is the time for Congress to end the diversion of TSA fees and finally allow those funds to be reinvested back into adequate staffing and equipment needed to create a more safe, healthy and secure air travel process.

Second, the travel industry is working together to communicate directly with travelers about what's being done to protect their health and safety. It is critical that TSA and CBP work with the broader travel industry to facilitate consumer confidence by clearly communicating health and safety procedures that passengers can expect at airports; the agencies must have adequate funding to carry out this objective.

Third, there are several steps Congress can take to mitigate damage, shorten the industry's recovery time and increase long-term competitiveness. An important solution is the widespread implementation of opt-in biometric identification. This technology has already proven successful at facilitating secure, efficient travel, and further promotes the health of travelers by providing a contactless screening process. Registered traveler program participants are already familiar with biometric identification, but TSA and CBP must invest in CAT-C and CT screening technology to bring touchless security screening to the checkpoint. Importantly, investments in CAT-C technology should happen in tandem with allowing for interaction between the Secure Flight Database and the registered traveler program. Ensuring that all identity verification methods at the TSA checkpoint can utilize the Secure Flight database makes sense for security and the facilitation of passengers.

Congress must also take steps to push back the REAL ID enforcement deadline until the travel industry is fully ready for enforcement and implementation will not interrupt recovery. As stated previously, it took the travel industry 18 months to recover after the 9/11 attacks; the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic is nine times worse and is likely to stretch across

multiple years. Ranking Member Lesko’s Trusted Traveler REAL ID Relief Act would be critical in requiring the TSA to develop a contingency plan to allow those with non-compliant IDs to still clear the security checkpoint after the enforcement date.⁶

Finally, it is crucial that we put the right recovery strategies in place now to mitigate the pandemic’s economic damage and get our country back on track. According to a report conducted by Tourism Economics, travel loss mitigation efforts could see the industry gain 1.3 million jobs and \$147 billion in overall GDP by the end of the year.⁷ These strategies include:

- Enacting a temporary travel tax credit that provides a refundable tax credit for transportation (including airfares) lodging, food and entertainment, as a way to help American families reconnect with each other, stimulate travel demand and accelerate rehiring.
- Restoring the business food and entertainment tax deductions to encourage companies to reinvest in their communities by doing business at local restaurants and centers for entertainment and the arts; and
- Funding a local travel promotion campaign to help promote businesses that have safely reopened and provide information to travelers about how they can travel safely to a destination and what’s being done to protect their health during their stay.

Every month that the downturn is mitigated would bring back almost \$17 billion to the travel industry and \$21 billion to overall U.S. GDP.

The travel industry—and the larger American economy—will not recover on its own. We need resources, stimulus, planning, and clear communication to travelers and employees to ensure air travel can safely resume and help power our nation’s economic revival. Travel is not

⁶ <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/5827?s=1&r=8>

⁷ https://www.ustravel.org/sites/default/files/media_root/document/Coronavirus2020_Impacts_April15.pdf

going to look the same as before this pandemic. Every segment of the travel and aviation community has made significant changes to protect the health and safety of all travelers and workers.

Thank you again to the Subcommittee for having us here today.