



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Subcommittee Hearing Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) *Climbing Again: Stakeholder Views on Resuming Air Travel in the COVID-19 Era*

June 18, 2020

I welcome stakeholder perspectives on safely resuming air travel in the era of COVID-19. The aviation sector consists of so much more than TSA and FAA. It includes airports, municipal authorities, airlines, and— importantly— all their dedicated employees.

Additionally, it includes civil rights and civil liberties organizations who focus on protecting travelers' privacy and civil rights—a heightened concern in the wake of the coronavirus. COVID-19 has not only inflicted unprecedented loss of life on our country but it has devastated industries including the aviation sector.

Our nation's aviation system has been on the frontline of efforts to stop the spread of this pandemic from the beginning. TSA's Transportation Security Officers constantly interact with passengers, flight crewmembers, and other airport workers—putting themselves at risk each and every day. According to TSA, to date 651 TSA employees have tested positive for the virus, of which 468 employees have recovered and, sadly, five have died.

And as Chairman of this Committee, I have advocated tirelessly on behalf of TSA's frontline workforce and demanded that they be issued appropriate protective equipment—like gloves and masks—to do their important work. They, after all, are on the front lines of aviation security, keeping the traveling public secure from threats to transportation during a global pandemic.

We must continue to make every effort to ensure that all aviation workers are kept safe from this virus—this includes airport workers, flight crew members, and mechanics. Failure to keep these employees safe has severe negative implications for not only the workers and the aviation sector but also risks further spread of the virus.

Like I mentioned earlier, the impact of COVID-19 has been devastating to the sector. According to TSA, air travel is down 84 percent from this exact moment last year. Given this reality, the federal government must establish the right health, safety, and security standards to protect airport workers and restore public confidence in travel.

This will require significant coordination and collaboration on the part of agencies like TSA, FAA, and the White House—coordination and collaboration that currently does not exist. Instead, we see a patchwork of standards and requirements throughout the aviation sector. The American people and the traveling public deserve better.

That is why I called for DHS and DOT to establish an interagency task force to ensure that all efforts and policies are coordinated, at the highest levels, in a holistic manner to support the successful recovery of the aviation industry.

Recent news reports have suggested that DHS may be preparing to commence a temperature check program where TSA would be tasked with checking the temperatures of departing passengers to identify individuals who may have COVID-19. I find this news alarming given that there is an absence of evidence that such health screenings are effective especially since people can spread COVID-19 asymptotically.

Not to mention, there are civil rights and civil liberties concerns around TSA conducting temperature checks. I am particularly concerned about DHS collecting, using, and safeguarding the sensitive health information of the traveling public, airport workers, and airline crewmembers.

Additionally, given that COVID-19 disproportionately impacts certain communities—including African Americans and the elderly—any proposed temperature check protocols must be designed to guard against the potential discrimination of travelers.

All the issues I just raised highlight that any federal temperature check program must undergo the “notice and comment” regulatory process to ensure the proper roll-out of temperature checks at our nation’s airports. The future of the aviation industry in the COVID-19 era will include a number of challenges, as I have just outlined.

As the Chairman of this Committee, I am committed to working with TSA and aviation stakeholders to ensure that the sector ultimately succeeds—despite these challenges. I am interested in hearing from today’s witnesses on how we collectively can do so.

#

Media contact: Adam Comis at (202) 225-9978