

Oral Testimony of Susannah Carr, as prepared
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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

Chairman DeFazio, Ranking Member Graves, and Members of the Committee thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak with you today.

I have been a Flight Attendant for United Airlines and a member of AFA since 2015. What began as a means to see the world turned into the career of my dreams. I take pride in my role as one of aviation's first responders, a safety professional certified by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA).

When the reports of COVID-19 began to circulate, I like many hoped it would be contained, that it would be addressed swiftly, and that the impact to our industry would be minimal. What began as a few cancelled flights to Asia quickly escalated to a full pull down of our flight schedule. My life and the lives of my coworkers were immediately disrupted. Overnight, our industry went from thriving to at risk of total collapse. Within a matter of days, the security of our jobs came into question. If something didn't change fast not only would we be without our careers, we would be without our health insurance during a global pandemic. Without the swift action of Congress in the drafting and passing of the CARES ACT, I would be on furlough now. Because of your leadership, I kept my job. I am able to pay my bills and have the peace of mind that a paycheck and medical insurance coverage provides, particularly in a time of crisis.

I want to work and have remained on active status with my airline throughout the pandemic, but 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.

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, our families at home, and millions of businesses counting on the resumption of safe commercial air travel.

I have been ready and on-call to report to for assignment. My most recent assignment was airport stand-by. Procedures had changed and I had to report early in order to complete a brief health assessment and a temperature check. I was cleared before I was admitted through security.

During my last assignment the normally busy Newark airport was nearly empty. While on duty I was called to preboard a flight to Houston. The gate area was crowded with passengers not following the social distancing guidelines including removing their masks. When I was released from my boarding assignment the gate areas remained equally crowded.

The next time I report to work, which could be tomorrow, I will be required to submit additional health assessments which include self examination, and temperature check via a company application.

Each time I come to work there is a risk of exposure. I haven't been able to visit my mother in over 3 months because she is in a high risk category. My coworkers and I worry about bringing this virus home to our loved ones.

COVID-19 remains an unprecedented threat to aviation. The traveling public needs to feel confident that they are safe to travel and be aware of the changes made for their safety. Creating a unified set of rules for all airlines ensures there is no confusion or personal interpretation of safety guidelines. The DOT has taken steps to protect the health of passengers before requiring passengers to refrain from smoking and to wear a seatbelt while seated, in a post-pandemic world, wearing a mask should be no different.

Based on my years of experience, I know that a federal mandate to require all passengers and crew to wear a face mask while in the airport and while on board the aircraft is necessary. The virus is a safety threat that we cannot see, and yet we must continue to do everything in our power to protect ourselves and the passengers who have placed their trust in us. I believe that clear federal rules will also help rebuild confidence in air travel and allow us to play our role in the country's broader economic recovery.

Although air travel is slowly picking back up, it is nowhere near the level that it was before the pandemic began. We will almost certainly need continued support after September 30th. That is why Congress must act now to continue the work the CARES ACT began. Payroll Support needs to be continued through at least January 31st. Supporting workers, like me, during a recession and ensuring we can continue to contribute not only as aviation's first responders but as part of a recovering economy. Without an extension, mass layoffs are surely a certainty.

My fellow aviation workers have shown incredible bravery as they've continued to work on the frontlines of this pandemic. We shouldn't have to depend on the good will of carriers or on voluntary international standards to keep us and our passengers safe during this health crisis. We need a mandatory federal standard to keep everyone safe. We are counting on Congress and the members of this committee to get through this difficult time. Thank you for inviting me I look forward to your questions.