



Sent via email

June 30, 2021

Dr. Rochelle P. Walensky, Director
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
1600 Clifton Road
Atlanta, GA 30333

David P. Pekoske, Administrator
Transportation Security Administration
601 South 12th Street
Arlington, VA 22201

RE: Face Masks on Public Transportation Conveyances and at Transportation Hubs

Dear Director Walensky and Administrator Pekoske:

The Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, AFL-CIO (AFA-CWA), representing nearly 50,000 Flight Attendants at 17 airlines, continues to strongly support the CDC Mask Order for people on public transportation conveyances and at transportation hubs. In conjunction with the FAA's Compliance and Enforcement Program Order¹ and the TSA's Security Directive², which are currently in effect through September 13, 2021, the CDC order has been effective at ensuring that airline passengers understand the requirement to wear a mask on aircraft and ground transportation, as well as in airports. This has been – and continues to be - essential to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 during air travel, which safeguards passengers and crewmembers and continues the positive trend in the recovery of the airline industry, which will not recover without the full return of international travel.

In the United States, the state-based average for people who are fully vaccinated is now approximately 47%.³ Within that average, though, there are significant regional variations with a low of only 27% (Mississippi) and a high of 59% (Vermont). While the COVID-19 vaccines are widely available in the U.S. now, a key constituency on our planes - children under the age of 12 - still do not have access. We are aware some are questioning the CDC mask order for passengers and crewmembers who are fully vaccinated. We certainly look forward to the day that masks are no longer required, but we are not there yet for transportation. We support the federal mask mandate in transportation, and, for these key reasons, it is crucial that your mask Order remain in place at this time.

Currently, Flight Attendants are tasked with enforcing the mask mandate onboard. Most passengers are compliant, but a vocal minority willfully choose to remove their masks inflight, even though they confirmed their willingness to comply when they bought their ticket and when they checked in for their flight. This year, the rate of documented disruptive passenger incidents is at an all-time high and just last week TSA announced that, starting in July 2021, it will resume its voluntary classes in self-defense training for Flight Attendants and pilots.⁴ Union safety representatives consistently report that most disruptive passenger incidents currently involve non-compliance with mask policies, and often a contributor to the incidents is alcohol consumption. Now is not the time to send passengers mixed

¹ FAA. "FAA Compliance and Enforcement Program." Order 2150.3C CHG 4. January 13, 2021.

² TSA. "Security Measures - Mask Requirements." Security Directive 1544-21-02A. April 30, 2021.

³ Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center (2021) "Vaccination Rollouts Across the United States," Available online at: <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/vaccines/us-states>, accessed June 28, 2021.

⁴ Boston Herald, *TSA to resume defense training after spike in disruptive airline passengers*, Published June 27, 2021; available online at: <https://www.bostonherald.com/2021/06/27/tsa-to-resume-defense-training-after-spike-in-disruptive-airline-passengers/>, accessed June 28, 2021.

messages about whether masks are necessary. Allowing a mask exemption for people who claim to be fully vaccinated would make the Flight Attendants' job even harder for two reasons:

1. It would be impossible for Flight Attendants to readily distinguish between passengers who claim to be vaccinated and those who do not;
2. If half of the passengers on a given flight (for example) make that claim that they are vaccinated, then the remaining half may either choose not to fly at all due to safety concerns or may become agitated that masks are not being worn in this densely populated space.

To be clear, our experience is that the anxiety over masks goes both ways - those who don't want to wear them and those who are anxious when others do not while the pandemic continues. In this case, vaccinations do not help us create calm in the cabin. Only clear, consistent communications on the rules and the consequences for non-compliance does that.

Not only would Flight Attendants not be able to reliably identify vaccinated passengers, airlines could not do so either. Currently, there is no central and reliable vaccination database maintained by the CDC or another government agency. As a result, airlines would have to rely on passenger claims about their vaccination status, and we also know our youngest passengers are not vaccinated.

Globally, the highly contagious Delta variant of COVID-19 has already been identified in at least 92 countries, including the United States. In response, the WHO recently recommended that fully vaccinated people continue to wear masks, specifically to stem the transmission of this variant.⁵ U.S. airlines transport people from and to all corners of the globe, including those where the Delta variant is already the dominant strain. Also, masks not only help to protect more vulnerable passengers from the Delta variant, but they also help to protect passengers and crewmembers who are unable to get vaccinated for valid medical reasons - but still need to fly. As we work to safely return international service, we must pay close attention to the actions taken around the world to contain the virus. We know that air travel depends on airline passengers having no questions about the safety of aviation. This is no time to deviate from the actions being taken around the world to stop the spread of the virus or variants. We need total confidence in U.S. aviation, for not only our health, but also our economic security.

Finally, we note that your agency has cited data to suggest that people who are fully vaccinated with one of the mRNA vaccines can still test positive for COVID-19, albeit with a lower viral load and, thus, reduced transmissibility.⁶ Still, many people are either not vaccinated or are not vaccinated with mRNA vaccines. Until those same questions of viral load and transmissibility have been properly answered for all vaccines, and until the vaccination rates in this country and globally are higher, it is prudent to mandate masks in high-density, enclosed, indoor spaces like aircraft. We also know the critical role that transportation can play to either stop or mitigate the spread of any communicable disease. Pandemic fatigue cannot lead to decisions that extend the harm of the pandemic.

In recent months, we have appreciated efforts by CDC, TSA, and the FAA to engage with our union and other transportation unions as workplace policies in transportation are reviewed. We encourage you to continue to engage with us to provide input on the impact of these policies and how any changes may affect our work and safety. Consistent, repeated communication is the most helpful as we move

⁵ CNBC, *WHO urges fully vaccinated people to continue to wear masks as delta Covid variant spreads*, Available online at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/06/25/delta-who-urges-fully-vaccinated-people-to-continue-to-wear-masks-as-variant-spreads.html>, Published June 25, 2021, accessed on June 28, 2021.

⁶ CDC, *Science Brief: COVID-19 Vaccines and Vaccination*, Updated May 27, 2021; Available online at: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/science/science-briefs/fully-vaccinated-people.html>, accessed June 28, 2021.

forward, and these meetings ensure that government, airlines, airports, and unions are all providing clarity for the public and the people charged with keeping them safe.

Considering the conditions described in this letter and the status of the pandemic, there should be no question about the need to keep the federal mask mandate in place at least through September 13th. We appreciate your clear communication to us that there are no plans to lift the mask mandate before that time. Until the pandemic is under control, we continue to support all efforts, including mask mandates, to stop the spread of the virus and the harm it has caused to our lives and livelihoods.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sara Nelson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Sara Nelson
International President

CC: Secretary Pete Buttigieg, Department of Transportation
Administrator Steve Dickson, Federal Aviation Administration