

**STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE JOEL SZABAT,
ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR AVIATION AND INTERNATIONAL
AFFAIRS, PERFORMING THE DUTIES OF THE UNDERSECRETARY
OF TRANSPORTATION FOR POLICY**

**BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES SENATE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON AVIATION AND SPACE**

**FROM SARS TO CORONAVIRUS: EXAMINING THE ROLE OF
GLOBAL AVIATION IN CONTAINING THE SPREAD OF INFECTIOUS
DISEASE**

Good afternoon Chairman Cruz, Ranking Member Sinema, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for inviting me to testify on behalf of the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) and Secretary Elaine L. Chao on our efforts to minimize the risk of spread of COVID-19 in the United States. We continue to play an active role in President Trump's response to the outbreak and the whole-of-government effort to ensure the welfare of the American people. We are taking necessary actions and preparations to ensure the continued safety and efficiency of our Nation's transportation system and minimize disruption to trade and commerce.

On February 26th, President Trump appointed Vice President Pence to lead the U.S. Government's effort to combat the virus. Secretary Azar, who chairs the White House Task Force, remains focused on coordinating the USG response to the outbreak. I represent the Department of Transportation on the Task Force. The Task Force, comprised of subject matter experts from the White House and several U.S. Government agencies, is charged with leading the Administration's efforts to contain the spread of the virus, while ensuring that the American people have the most accurate and up-to-date health and travel information.

The USG's health professionals have the lead in determining the response to the COVID-19 outbreak. DOT, in its supporting role, has and will continue to coordinate daily with aviation stakeholders, foreign counterparts and other federal agencies to manage the risk in the United States. In this capacity, DOT continues to ensure:

1. An active airbridge remains in place for the safe return of Americans from affected areas;
2. Airlines are funneling passenger flights to one of the eleven designated U.S. airports equipped to health-screen Americans returning from affected areas;
3. Continued air and sea cargo traffic between the US and China;
4. Health protocols are established to protect the crews of aircraft continuing to fly between the US and foreign locations; and,
5. Dissemination of health messages about the virus, for airlines to use to inform their passengers.

The U.S. government's travel restrictions and advisories have been a remarkably effective 'first layer' of containment. These travel requirements delayed the arrival of the virus to the United States, giving the nation precious time to prepare further measures, and plan for mitigation.

This achievement took the cooperation of nearly 200 commercial airlines, a like number of overseas airports, and the Civil Aviation Authority of China. The Department, including the Federal Aviation Administration, is also working closely with our sister federal agencies under the Task Force aegis, especially the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Customs & Border Protection, Transportation Security Administration, and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. Their expertise and authorities, as well as those of the Departments of State, Homeland Security and Health & Human Services, were all necessary to accomplish this success.

On January 31, 2020, the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) declared that the virus presented a Public Health Emergency in the United States. That same day, the President exercised his authority under the Immigration and Nationality Act to issue a Proclamation suspending the entry into the United States of certain foreign nationals, to protect persons within the United States from the threat of this communicable disease. While this Proclamation is in effect, most foreign nationals who have been in China within the last 14 days prior to their arrival are barred from entering the U.S., with various exceptions, including lawful permanent residents and most immediate family members of U.S.

citizens and lawful permanent residents. As the Coronavirus expanded beyond the borders of China, we gained concurrence with the governments of Italy and South Korea to institute aggressive containment actions, which include exit screenings.

Any U.S. citizen returning to the U.S. who has been in China's Hubei province in the previous 14 days is subject to up to 14 days of mandatory quarantine. Any returning U.S. citizen who has been in the rest of mainland China within the previous 14 days undergoes proactive entry health screening at a designated port of entry, as well as up to 14 days of self-quarantine. To focus the expertise of the medical professionals conducting screening, the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has directed all flights inbound to the U.S. carrying persons who have recently traveled from, or were otherwise present within, China to arrive at one of eleven U.S. airports.¹ Significant consideration, coordination, and analysis occurred to select the appropriate airports.

The U.S. Government has taken steps to ensure that the nearly 200,000 Americans who were in, or had recently left China, could return to the U.S. through an airbridge home. The number of passengers traveling from China to the United States has fallen from roughly 15,000 each day before the virus outbreak to fewer than 1,000 each day now.

The complexity of passenger flows across the globe include not just nonstop flights between the U.S. and China, but also travelers connecting through foreign countries. The Department was part of the Interagency coordination with foreign airports and airlines to establish a robust initial screening.

The welfare of passengers returning home is among the U.S. Government's highest priorities. HHS and the CDC developed a script to provide information on U.S. health screening at designated ports of entry, which DOT coordinated with governments and airlines for flight crews to read to passengers ahead of arrival. Today, all four carriers still providing flights to the U.S. from China are using this script. Further, DOT helped our Government partners enact workable health protocols for pilots and crews that continue to fly from China to the U.S. These

¹ Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport (ATL), Georgia; Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport (DFW), Texas; Detroit Metropolitan Airport (DTW), Michigan; Newark Liberty International Airport (EWR), New Jersey; Daniel K. Inouye International Airport (HNL), Hawaii; Washington-Dulles International Airport (IAD), Virginia; John F. Kennedy International Airport (JFK), New York; Los Angeles International Airport, (LAX), California; Chicago O'Hare International Airport (ORD), Illinois; Seattle-Tacoma International Airport (SEA), Washington; and San Francisco International Airport (SFO), California

protocols differ for China-based and U.S.-based crews, and allow continued all-cargo operations. U.S. cargo carriers that were offering scheduled and charter service between China and the United States before the outbreak continue to serve China.

Prior to and following the first Presidential Proclamation, DOT and interagency partners proactively communicated with air carriers and others in the aviation industry. DOT hosted multiple stakeholder calls with over 475 invited industry participants, representing 44 different U.S. and foreign air carriers, 26 domestic airports, and many trade associations, unions, and other valued partners. The Administration also communicated with foreign governments to maintain awareness of changes in their travel restrictions and screening and quarantine policies that could impact Americans traveling to or through those countries. Open communication is key to implementing practical solutions for continued operations.

As the President said on February 28th, these containment measures have been remarkably effective. As we plan for community transmission in the United States, DOT will be coordinating similar efforts with transit stakeholders, as part of the whole-of-government plan. The Task Force and U.S. Government Departments and Agencies continue to proactively plan for mitigation strategies by working with the State and local public health agencies that would be on the front line of “mitigation” efforts.

Successful containment and mitigation of the virus to keep the American people safe will depend on the efforts of all levels of government, the public health system, the transportation industry, and our communities. The ability to sustain transportation services, move emergency relief personnel and commodities, and mitigate adverse economic impacts requires effective transportation policy decisions. DOT is postured to respond effectively, and we continue to work closely closely with government and industry to support the USG’s response to the virus.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.